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FAMILY ON THE HILL



Family on

the Hill

A NOVEL BY
AMBROSE FLACK

NEW YORK
THOMAS Y. CROWELL COMPANY

FOR PETE
AND HIS COUSINS
ELLEN AND VINCE
AND DOUGLAS AND DAVID

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All the characters in this book are fictitious, and no reference is made or intended to any actual person, living or dead.

CHAPTER ONE

How to Cook a Carp

I first met the Otter family during a rainy spring excursion in the country.

Katy and I had come out to paint woodwork at Red Maples, but my fishing tackle was in the back of our car. We soon put down the pails and brushes, and drove along narrow dirt roads that cut through deep evergreen forests. I got out at every bridge and dropped my line to the water below.

The countryside was etched with a network of creeks and brooks, all of them having a good share of native trout. One rocky stream looked so alluring, I jumped down the bank and followed it. It was difficult to fish, for in spots it all but lost itself in a tangle of creeping and climbing growth, and I almost hanged myself, once or twice, on vines stretched from tree to tree and twisted like nooses. Presently, in a clearing near a deep pool, I came upon a tall, handsome boy, dressed in ragged blue overalls and wearing heavy rubber boots, several sizes too big for him. One of his feet rested on a mossy log, his elbow was on his knee, and his chin in the cup of his right hand.

Stretched along the length of the log was a huge blacksnake as thick in the middle as a man's arm. The boy was lost in a dream, and the sight of him reminded me of Verrocchio's wonderful statue of David which I had seen in the National Museum in Florence. The dead reptile accordingly became the head of Goliath, and the stout club in the boy's left hand the youthful conqueror's sword. His body had all the David's awkward charm and grace, but his mood was a curiously untriumphant one—as if his vic-

tory and the death had brought him no elation. "Well, there's a snake that won't eat any more little trout," I said, breaking the silence, and the boy's deep dream.

I sat down on a rock and studied him appreciatively. Even on such a gray day, his blue eyes were full of sun. His blond hair, cut very short—almost in convict fashion—showed a beautifully shaped skull. He was tall and muscular. I wondered if he belonged to one of the foreign families which had settled in this obscure northern New York State community, where land was very cheap; many of them had come from the near-by towns and cities where numerous factories had closed since the depression.

The youngster laughed merrily. He sat down on a log opposite my rock and ran his eyes over me—almost with compassion. I felt certain he realized I had caught nothing, and I keenly felt the absurd figure I made. Everything on my back had come from Abercrombie & Fitch, my fishing equipment was elaborate, but there was nothing to show for my elegance in the fine willow basket, ostentatiously strapped over my shoulder. I thought that while I became acquainted with this boy, I might just as well try my luck.

No sooner had I dropped my line into the pool, and put down my pole to light a cigarette than the pole shot into the air and the boy caught it just in time to save it from being dragged into the water. What I pulled out a few minutes later wasn't one of the big trout which lurked in the deep holes of the stream, but a monstrous carp—the most repulsive of fresh-water fish. I felt rather chagrined before the boy, having never really overcome a boyhood notion that it is a disgrace to catch nothing but a carp.

"Well, he'll never eat another small trout, either," laughed the youngster.

I didn't know what to do with the fish, and I wished I hadn't caught it. Then it occurred to me that since the natives hereabouts dined on the woodchucks which were so plentiful and made such excellent shooting, they might also relish a dish of carp.

"Would you like it?" I asked the boy. "I've heard they're good

to eat, cooked properly—but my wife doesn't know how. Or perhaps you could use it for fertilizer."

The boy's cornflower blue eyes darkened a shade or two. They became round and serious. "Oh, no, Mister," he said. "You keep it yourself. Carp make good eatin'. I'll tell ya how Mum usta cook 'em in the old country. She says everything tasted better there, anyway. All ya gotta do is clean the carp and stuff it with bread crumbs soaked in cream and melted butter. Garnish it with cel'ry and parsley, salt and pepper it and then nail it on a board and stick it in the oven. When it's baked good, take it outta the oven, throw away the carp, and eat the board."

While I was sharing the boy's irresistible laughter, a woman's voice—a deep, powerful contralto like a Valkyrie's—called "Geoff, oh Geoff!" A foghorn couldn't have penetrated the misty countryside more rousing, and the boy bestirred himself at once. "Well, I gotta go now, that's Mum callin'. We got trouble in our fambly. My brother Calvin ran away las' week, and we don't know where he is. An' I go 'round killin' snakes," he added, scornfully. "Well, s'long, Mister."

"So long," I said, hating to see him go.

The boy leaped over the log, then turned abruptly to face me once more. His face flushed red with excitement—he had suddenly made a tremendous discovery. His eyes blazed with the questions he wanted to ask, but a kind of delicacy, rather than shyness, forbade. Finally he gulped and blurted out: "Say, Mister, I think I know who you are. Your name's Curley, ain't it?"

I admitted that it was.

"And you jist came home from China, and you're gonna live in Red Maples. Your pitcher was in the paper, and Rolf cut it out and hung it up in our room between Eddie Rickenbacker an' General Pershing. I thought your face looked kinda familiar, but I didn't rekanize you without your medals or your uniform on." He paused, not because he was out of words, but because he was out of breath.

"We read all about you," he went on, almost panting now. "You

usta be a Flyin' Tiger, guardin' the Burma Road. The Japs went an' shot you down and took you prisoner but you excaped and got back safe after all kindsa excitin' a'ventures. Then you got some bad water and come down with the typhoid feeber an' your wife hadda go alla way to China ta fetch ya home. You were dec'rated by the Chinese Gover'ment."

The boy's admiration was so evident, I began to feel like the celebrity I didn't look. And as he continued to regard me with increasing homage in his eyes I could only hope that—even if I wasn't one—I did look a *little* like a brave man for his hero-worshiping sake; although I wasn't very tall, and part of my chin had been shot away, one of my legs was shorter than the other and my health was poor—and my ears were so large my mother used to say she hadn't known until the time I was a year old whether I was going to walk or fly.

"Well, so long again, Mr. Curley," he said. "I'm gonna tell the folks I met cha. Hope ta see you again real soon."

The dripping bushes swallowed him, and I heard the crash he made in the underbrush. Thick drops commenced to fall, and forgetting all about the carp, I hurried back to the car. Katy was sitting in it, waiting for me. She had put down her book and was quietly watching the silver, slanting lines of rain. I climbed in and told her about the adventure I had just had.

"I think he must be one of the Otters," said Katy, who sat behind the wheel—I wasn't driving. "They live up on that big hill, You can't see their house now, but it's visible when the trees and vines are bare. I met one of the boys, Alix, last winter, and had him in the house—fed him everything left in the pantry. He seemed famished. Later I heard they live for weeks at a time on potatoes and macaroni."

"What's their nationality?"

"Czechs," said Katy. "I suppose the name, Otter, is some Americanized version of the original."

CHAPTER TWO

Menagerie on a Hilltop

After lunch that day Katy baked a chocolate cake while I took a nap in the little sitting room off the parlor. This charming retreat was inconsistently adorned with Giorgione Venuses and Bellini virgins, a green carpet, a love seat, a divan and a fern. It had a continental atmosphere and suggested a perfect background for love making. Red Maples was an old stone house, roughly finished on the outside. The inside, however, I can describe only as comely. It would have been lovely without a stick of furniture. It had good light and spaciousness. For an old country house, the ceilings were high. There was a good deal of woodwork, light and delicate, lustrous and sweet-smelling. It wasn't hidden under too many rugs, or behind too much furniture and too many pictures.

I lay down on the sofa under a window that looked out at the garden, and, beyond that, to the woods surrounding the house on three sides. I could hear the teakettle sing and Katy hum contentedly while she stirred up the batter. The rain had stopped and the wind blew hard. There was a sad, soothing whistling along the eaves. From where I lay I could see the heavy, low-hanging clouds scurry by, and the trees and bushes bend back and forth. The house shook, and the entire landscape seemed full of motion. It was like being on a boat. I slept almost at once, and dreamed I was on a ship, sailing across the warm Indian Ocean. I woke up feeling wonderfully refreshed—and smelling the cake Katy had just taken out of the oven.

Not wishing to have a man hanging around the kitchen, Katy suggested that I take a little walk while she frosted the cake. I put on my hat and jacket and went outside—down to the little red iron bridge under which Otter Creek flows on its inconsequential way through swamp and thicket to Aspen Pond.

The bridge stood halfway between Red Maples and the foot of

Otter Hill. Right now shoots and tendrils of wild clematis and woodbine embraced the wrought-iron lattice work. In the grass near the roadside a big, fierce-looking cat was struggling with the blacksnake Geoff had killed that morning and the carp I had caught, trying to drag both carcasses along at once. When she saw me, she mewed angrily, abandoned the fish and continued to drag the snake along the dirt road. I followed, even when the creature turned off the road on a narrow path, and climbed up a bit of wild tableland on which a big shack was almost buried in a tangle of poison ivy, thorn apples, grapevines and brier which would have kept out lions.

Too many children for me to count, all amazingly pretty and amazingly alike, were playing there. Some were up in, under, and dangling from various trees. Fraternizing with them on terms of easiest intimacy were a flock of white Leghorns, a dog, three or four kittens, two goats and a calf. All were having a wonderful time. The chickens passed in and out of the front door with perfect familiarity, and even took short cuts through the open windows. The livestock collectively gobbled, cackled, quacked, barked, mewed, mooed as I approached; the children became silent and regarded me with friendly curiosity. They were indifferent to the spectacle of the cat dragging along the dead snake. She dropped it in a clump of grass, hopped to the porch, scaled the wall to the eaves, and vanished through a hole in the roof to her lair in the attic.

I feasted my eyes on the picturesque spot. The tumbledown shack was devoid of the slightest vestige of paint, and looked like the house in the fairy tale: it did not know which way to fall, and therefore decided to remain standing. I sat down on the chopping block and many small Otters commenced to entertain me with all manner of tricks, mostly gymnastic. They now regarded me with wide, delightful smiles, showing beautiful white teeth. Certainly, they were pleased to have company, and an interested stranger was an event to them. The boys wore overalls which contained more patch than original material, the babies and little girls tattered dresses with nothing underneath.

A bright, golden-haired boy of perhaps five or six spoke to me.

"Well, Mister," he said, "why don't you ax us how many of us they is? Mos' everybody gen'ally do."

"How many are you?" I asked.

"Well, they's sixteen of us, not countin' Ma and Pa," was his triumphant rejoinder.

A little golden girl rolled over to my side like a tumbleweed. "And do you go to school?" I asked.

"Yes, an' I like it, too," she piped. "But I think um too little ta like it alla time." Having delivered herself of this, she broke into a series of giggles, and rolled away.

A barefoot, ruddy-faced woman, dressed in stained calico, her hair tied in a knot on the back of her head, came out of the house, carrying a baby which she put down on the grass. She welcomed me with a sweet smile and a cordial How-do. Otherwise, she took my presence in a very matter-of-fact way. I could tell she was distressed about something. Her eyes were red; and she did not look much like a woman given to weeping.

"That's Mum," said one of the little boys, giving me a bashful smile. He looked as if he were very proud of her.

"An' here comes Geoff," piped the little girl.

"Ketch any more carp, Mister Curley?" asked Geoff, coming up and shaking hands. The older boys exchanged significant glances, and I guessed that Geoff had told them about me. I only hoped the knowledge of my adventures in China would make up to the Otters for the ignoble fact that I had caught nothing but a carp, good enough only for a depraved, half-wild cat.

Mrs. Otter whispered something to Geoff, after which the youngster asked me if I would like to see the rest of the farm. We made a tour of the barnyard, and Geoff talked about crops, livestock, the barn they wanted to build some day, the hard winter they'd been through and their high hopes for a good spring and summer. When we returned, a cluster of children was gathered around Mrs. Otter, and, evidently, had been trying to comfort her. She had just wiped her eyes with her apron, and Geoff, noticing, said in a tremulous

voice: "That's the first time I ever seen Mum cry 'cept when Elsie fell in the rosebush. It's about Calvin, you know. He's the one that run away."

I told Geoff I wished I could help them find Calvin.

"You kin," said Geoff. "That is, if you're goin' to the village. I'd ride in with ya."

I couldn't tell Geoff the doctor had asked me not to drive, and I only hoped Katy wouldn't be looking when I backed our car out of the barn. I said good-by to Mrs. Otter, who cordially invited me to come again. A group of children followed Geoff and me down the hillside. "Jist think, he's a real flyin' tigert," said a little boy called Mickey, in an awed voice. He looked a little doubtful and I guessed he was disappointed in me. Boy-fashion, he had probably dreamed of a flying "tigert" as something half-man, half-animal, with arms, legs, claws, yellow stripes, fangs—a creature at once fierce, destructive and benevolent.

Geoff waited for me at the red iron bridge. He turned out to be a very entertaining boy. All along the way to the village, he steeped me in the local color of the countryside.

He showed me the spot where a Mr. Muller had hanged himself, five years before, and the charred remains of the house which Mrs. Muller had burnt down, herself with it, after she discovered his body dangling from a limb of the oxheart cherry tree. "She did it jist for spite," laughed Geoff.

He showed me the meadow in which a Mr. Sprout had been gored to death by a bull, and a field where an old woman trying to get to the village to buy groceries on a cold winter's day had frozen to death.

Geoff mentioned the names of all the families who lived in the scattered dwellings on the dirt road that wound through meadow land, pine woods and beech forests, sounding a note of warning about those who were socially eligible and those who were not. He seemed to be acquainted with all their virtues, vices, habits, peculiarities and financial condition. A Polish family by the name of

Maida borrowed, but never returned—"remember that," said Geoff, "in case you ever run inter them." Two German brothers, named Schwab, lived in houses side by side, with only an apple orchard in between, yet hadn't spoken to each other during the past twenty years, as the result of a quarrel over a boundary line. One of them, Fritz, often got drunk on potato whiskey, and then you had to watch out for him when his bus came lurching down the dirt road. "He never gave nobody room ta pass," said Geoff.

Then there was the Merino family, from whom the Otters had bought their place. Mrs. Merino had had her eye on William and Calvin, the two big Otter boys, for a long time; and every time she saw one or both of them, she proposed.

"Is she a widow?" I asked.

"Oh, no, she's got a husban' and four daughters."

"And she proposes to your brothers?"

"Yes, but for her daughter Angelina. She wants one of 'em ta marry Angelina, but they keep on tellin' her they like ta pick out their own women. Well, Calvin picked out a girl called Red, and it's been the ruination o' him," said Geoff, gloomily.

He lapsed into a thoughtful mood. Recognizing a delicate family situation, I asked no questions.

But in a little while Geoff brightened again, and pointed to a fence along a ditch where, in summer, it was "all growed over with bittersweet berries." He picked them and sold them for fifteen cents a bunch. When we approached the village, with tall oaks towering over the houses, and smoke curling in the blue air, Geoff announced that his destination was "the priest's house."

"Do you mean old Father Justin?" I asked.

"Yes, and he's a very good old man," said Geoff, gravely.

Geoff said goodbye to me in front of Father Justin's red-brick dwelling, and I wondered if perhaps the priest was assisting his family in the search for Calvin. I had lived in the village twenty years ago and one of my favorite haunts was a wide path under a row of honey locusts which Father Justin had planted in a lane

near his house. It was one of the local beauty spots, but for some reason the old priest had had the trees cut down in early spring, just as they were turning green.

I stopped at the drugstore for some sleeping tablets, and then had a session with the local real estate agent, after which I put the deed to Red Maples into my pocket. I felt very lighthearted. I was puzzled and delighted by Geoff's family, and keenly looked forward to seeing more of them. They reminded me of a Chinese country family in whose hospitable house I had lain, too ill to be moved, for six weeks. There were almost as many Hsiangs as Otters, sturdy, anxious little boys and girls, happy and eager amongst themselves, devoted to their parents and their home. They waited on me hand and foot. If I asked one of the boys to fetch my cigarettes, half a dozen of them contended for the honor. When I was able to get outside and sit in the sun, it helped me get well just to watch those charming, almond-eyed youngsters at play. The family's proudest possession was a lovely old teacup, adorned with rosebuds and golden leaves, and when Mrs. Hsiang gave me my tea in it, the children, delighted, all gathered around to watch and admire.

I drove home, manufacturing excuses to give Katy for having taken out the car. I thought about the Hsiangs, wondering how it was with them so far away, and marveling how much like the Otter family they were. The tree tops rustled agreeably in the breeze, and a symphony of frogs was singing in the damp meadows under the starlight.

CHAPTER THREE

Family Portrait

*S*moky Valley was part of a fresh, unspoiled countryside, with big ponds and clear cold streams and narrow dirt roads, running like wild things through the thick hemlock forests. But the greatest charm it possessed for me was the Otter Family.

On my second visit to Otter Hill, Mrs. Otter invited me into the front parlor where she was peeling potatoes. The room contained a few battered chairs and tables, a parlor stove, and a piece of linoleum on the floor. For ornaments on the walls, there were mere and pere Otter's framed wedding certificate and pictures of the bigger children holding their rosaries, prayer-books, blessed candles and wearing their First Communion clothes. But the room wasn't always without good furniture, Mrs. Otter hastened to assure me. They liked nice things, and enjoyed them from time to time.

On several occasions they had made purchases on the installment plan, only to lose the furniture when they were unable to keep up the payments. One day there was a knock at the door, and Mary, the oldest girl, thinking it was her current young man come to call, hastily wiped the dust off the brand-new tables, chairs and stands. But it was only a man who had come in a truck to take the furniture away. After the room had been stripped, and the truck rolled downhill, Mary looked at Mrs. Otter and said:

"Oh, Mamma, now I'm sorry I dusted all that furniture."

Mrs. Otter peeled potatoes with incredible rapidity. The peelings that fell on the newspaper at her feet were thin as tissue paper. "Summer come, me have new potato, then me cook with jacket on," said Mrs. Otter, complacently.

"They taste better like that, don't they, Mum?" asked little Dennis.

"Mum's allus waitin' for summer ta come. Remember, Ma, watchin' water don't make it boil," cautioned Mickey.

Mrs. Otter dropped a potato into the bucket. "China lady you tell us about," she said, sweetly, "me hope she have plenty potato to feed children." The stories I had told the Otters about my Chinese friends fascinated them, and Mrs. Otter felt a special kinship towards Mrs. Hsiang because she, too, owned a large family. "Where's China?" asked little Davy.

"It's a place across the Pacific Ocean. A nice lady lives there. She's got a farm and a dog and—"

"Has she got a little girl?" piped Molly.

"Yes, just like you," I said, but I couldn't tell Molly that little Mayling Hsiang had drowned in the flood.

"Does she go to school?"

"To the mission school," I said. Molly told everybody she went to school, but she was too little to be a regular pupil. The teacher simply allowed her to accompany the other children and sometimes to sit in the classes as a listener and spectator while they studied and learned. But Molly was so smart, she learned a good deal, and knew as much as Davy and Dennis, who didn't like school well enough to make apt pupils.

"You ain't never axed us what all our names are?" said Mickey.

"And what are they?" I said, anxious to observe hilltop protocol. Mickey counted them off on his fingers.

"You skipped me," piped Molly.

"I jis wanted ta see if you'd notice," said Mickey, triumphantly.

"Well, I learned all their names," I told Katy when I got home that afternoon.

"And what are they?" she said, putting on her rubber gloves, and eyeing a bunch of dirty carrots to be cleaned and scraped.

"Well, there's William and Calvin, the two oldest boys. They're not twins, yet they were both born in the same year; William in February, on George Washington's birthday, and Calvin in December, for a Christmas present."

"They should have named William George," said Katy.

"They didn't know he was born on Washington's birthday until he started going to school," I said.

"How old is Mary?"

"She's sixteen. Geoff's thirteen, Walter's twelve, and Alix is eleven. Rosie and Rolf, the twins, are eight. Jennie's seven and Mickey's six. Davy and Dennis, the other pair of twins, are five. Molly's four, Tessie's three, Nannie's two and Co-coo's the baby. She was born last November, on Thanksgiving Eve, for a Thanksgiving present."

"They have nice American names," murmured Katy.

"Yes, Mr. Otter insisted on that," I said. "When Calvin was born, Mrs. Otter wanted to name him Augustine, after the saint. But Mr. Otter had heard the name Calvin somewhere and he liked the sound of it. Mrs. Otter thinks it may be that because Calvin was given the name of the French Protestant reformer his guardian angel doesn't watch over him as carefully as she would if he'd been named for St. Augustine, and that's why he got in trouble with a girl called Red."

William, the oldest boy, looked four or five years older than he really was. That was probably because he had always worked so hard and suffered so many hardships. All his life he had been compelled to take things very seriously. He spoke and acted, not like a boy at all, but like a fully matured man; was quiet, grave and attentive. Mary was sweet and utterly unspoiled; and so pretty, one scarcely noticed the outlandish clothes she wore, of which the village belles, behind her back, poked so much fun. She hadn't met a boy yet whom she greatly liked, and, meanwhile, preferred to go to dances and parties with William and Calvin—whom she adored, and who saw to it that she was never a wallflower.

"Three of the boys I can hardly tell apart when I see them on the road," said Katy, scraping away at a carrot. "One of them is the Alix I had over here last winter."

"They're Geoff, Walter and Alix," I said. "William calls them The Three Musketeers." These boys were all engagingly blond and blue-eyed, handsome little Vikings indeed. Geoff loved cornflakes better than anything to eat in the world, he said, but seldom got them; it was Walter's ambition to visit the city, just once, and see the Public Library; and Alix ardently coveted a coat and a pair of pants that matched, to wear on Sundays. The three boys were inseparable.

"One of the girls is a tomboy all right," said Katy. "Every time I see her she's up in a tree."

"That's Rosie, Rolf's twin."

Rolf was the best athlete in the family. He could climb the highest trees and make running jumps across Otter Creek in some

very wide places. Rosie, because she was his twin, thought she ought to be able to do anything he could do. She was always trying, and so she was always falling out of trees, and falling into Otter Creek.

"Which one is Jennie?" asked Katy.

"Oh, she's the dainty one. Poor little thing, she tries so hard to keep the kitchen clean. But the odds against it are overwhelming."

I had never seen Jennie with a dirty face or hands. I often saw her sitting on a rock in the creek, washing out clothes. How she treasured an embroidered handkerchief she found on the road, and nursed along a bottle of toilet water which had come from the five-and-ten for her birthday! Her dearest possession was a tarnished old ring, with the stone missing.

"But Mickey's the most amusing one of the lot," I said. "He can swear like a trooper when he gets mad." Mickey, indeed, was the family blasphemer, atheist and wit—and the smartest one in school, although he never studied and didn't seem to care much about books. Davy and Dennis were the 'fraidy-cats and wept upon the slightest provocation. Molly was the first of a string of little golden girls that went right down to Coo-Coo. Molly quickly became my favorite.

A glamorous little creature she was, with all her wildness. When she sat on a big rock in the creek, with her golden locks gleaming in the sun, she reminded me of an infant Lorelei. "I usta be a twin, too," she told me, one day.

"Whose twin were you, Molly?" I asked.

"Elsie's," she piped. "But she fell in the rosebush."

Molly didn't *look* out of her eyes at one; she peered from them, as from behind a veil. Her piping little voice was a greater charm even than those curiously veiled blue eyes. It made me think she was born with a miniature calliope in her throat. For all her scant four years, Molly was afraid of nothing.

She frequently made long trips into the countryside on her sturdy little feet. One time I found her trotting along the dirt road in the dark shadows of the tall pines, a good four miles away from Otter

Hill; she was going very fast, trying to get home in time for supper. All day long she flew around, chasing butterflies, sticking out her tongue at strangers she didn't fancy, digging worms, catching turtles and hopping barefoot over the sharp rocks in the creek. But as she sat in classes in school, she was a model of propriety.

The biggest blacksnakes had no terrors for Molly; she often chased them right across the Creek. Mrs. Otter told me she was very handy in the kitchen. She could fry potatoes, cook oatmeal—and wanted to learn how to make taffy. She was wonderfully efficient with babies; it fascinated me to watch her feed Nannie and carry around Coo-Coo, the baby.

Tessie was a human whirligig; chips of blue and gold flew off her as she danced and reeled around. Nannie was very bashful, always clinging to Mrs. Otter's skirts, trying to hide herself. Coo-Coo was fat and yellow as a butterball. Her only plaything was the stove handle. She never cried, even when ants crawled over her, and when bees, attracted by her daffodil yellow curls, buzzed and swarmed over them.

"Mrs. Otter must be about forty," said Katy. "I saw her go down the road yesterday calling 'Rosie, Rosie.' She's quite a Junoesque person."

"She's thirty-nine," I said. "And don't you think she's a handsome woman?"

Katy admitted that she was. But Mrs. Otter, handsome though she was, probably hadn't given her appearance a thought in twenty years. Mary told me she was the only one in the family who had no space in the big chest of drawers. She had no personal belongings of her own—no hairbrush, comb, ornaments. If the children gave her something pretty and useless for her birthday, she was disappointed and chagrined. She delighted in kitchen gadgets, garden tools, and a package of seeds filled her with joy. One of her ambitions was to acquire a new kitchen stove, and Mr. Otter hoped he'd be able to arrange it for her this year as a Christmas present.

Mrs. Otter's old stove was fairly groaning with age, giving out in the middle, and standing on two pairs of very shaky legs. Some-

times it backed up and belched fumes and smoke that flooded the house and drove everybody out of doors. It generally acted as if it were going to balk any minute, and refuse to cook another meal.

But Mrs. Otter coaxed it along, and on each baking day it produced no less than twenty loaves of bread. Curiously enough, the Otters liked "store" bread better than fresh homemade bread, and canned fruits and vegetables better than the fresh variety in season.

If Mrs. Otter's stove seemed exhausted from bread-bearing, the lady herself was far from exhausted from childbearing. She told me she wished she could have a baby every year, for the rest of her life. With all her sixteen children on her mind, she never seemed harried or hurried, as so many mothers are. Each emergency as it came up seemed to add to her monumental calm. She had a kind of Oriental repose in her manner, which reminded me of Mrs. Hsiang, and other women—mothers of large families—I had seen in Chungking.

Mrs. Otter was very unlike the Old Woman Who Lived in the Shoe. She knew what to do every minute.

Certainly, the Otters were the happiest family I had ever known. They never quarreled among themselves. Each boasted of the others' accomplishments and didn't mention his own. The bigger boys faithfully tended the babies, and the little girls, like Molly, were capable beyond their years in looking after themselves. It never occurred to me to pity the Otters. Although they were the poorest family in the county, they seemed to have so much more than the Durstons, who were the richest. Whenever I drove to the city, I always brought back a bag of candy for the children. Whoever got the bag first passed it around and even gave Fluffy, the dog, a piece, before helping himself.

"What's Mr. Otter like?" asked Katy. "I haven't seen him yet."

"He's quite youthful in appearance—could almost pass for William's older brother. He has thick black hair, delicate features, and a fine complexion. He looks like a poet."

Good complexions run in families, of course. Mr. Otter was slim enough to wear William's or Calvin's odd shirts and pants when an

emergency made it necessary. He had a job in near-by Happy Valley, working on a WPA project, digging ditches. For the head of such a big family, he was an extremely modest man—almost shy. It was a pleasant sight to see him strolling down the road with six or eight young Otters trotting along at his side, listening to every word he said.

Mr. Otter was very fond of the piano, and he hoped some day he could buy one for Mary, but not until after he had given Mrs. Otter a new kitchen stove. He didn't know the name of the vice president of the United States, but, beginning with Cimabue, Duccio and Giotto, he could tell an interesting story about almost every one of the important painters of the Renaissance. He usually said very little, and listened, with apparent pleasure, to Mrs. Otter when she talked. She talked almost constantly, saying, like Mrs. Hsiang, "me go" and "me no go." She had decided opinions on everything.

But she was a great worker as well as talker. She worked in the fields, as well as cooking, baking and mending for her big family. In spring, she plowed and planted. In summer, she cultivated. In fall, she reaped. Most of her teeth had gone, but her vast zest for life hadn't. She got up at four every morning of her life. The very sight of the children stimulated her. When they were performing in the front yard, one of them perhaps on the roof, one in the thorn-apple tree, another straddling the calf, she was able to watch them all at once, and she could tell at the quickest glance if any was missing.

"Listen, Katy, and I'll tell you how they happened to buy Otter Hill from the Merinos," I said.

"I'm listening," said Katy.

"They rented the place for a year, and liked it so well they wanted to settle down there for good. Mrs. Otter said she was very tired of moving. But Mrs. Merino wanted one hundred dollars down for Otter Hill, and the balance of four hundred in monthly installments. She was ready to let another family have the place

when Mr. Otter was hurt in an automobile accident while driving to Happy Valley with a friend. 'Me very lucky,' he told me. 'Me fracture ankle, and insurance company give me hundred dollar. For two hundred dollar, I wish they fracture other ankle.' "

Katy had finished the carrots, and she put them in a saucepan full of water. "I met a fisherman who actually witnessed the arrival of the Otter family at Otter Hill," she said.

Early one morning in the previous spring, a big truck, loaded down with the Otters and all their earthly possessions, pulled off the road to make the climb. The chickens in their wire cages were cackling wildly, and all the other livestock were making noises each according to its kind. Mrs. Otter was driving, and Mr. Otter held some of the babies.

The children were piled on top of the furniture, singing and shouting. They took possession of the house with a speed that proved them to be old hands at moving. An hour after their arrival, a wisp of smoke was curling from the chimney, the smell of coffee floated down to the creek embracing the foot of Otter Hill, Molly had already fallen in the water, and Mickey had killed a big rat with his slingshot.

That same morning, Mrs. Otter had not only arranged her possessions in the house, but had also done a washing which was unfurled in the breeze on a line strung from the thorn-apple tree to the lilac bush.

It was a family just like the Otters that old hilltop shack seemed to have been waiting for.

"If Erskine Caldwell had known the Otter family, perhaps the world might not have tramped up and down Tobacco Road," said Katy.

CHAPTER FOUR

A Man for All That

*I*t isn't every family that is privileged to have a creek in their front yard, like the Otters.

On all good days, and on some bad ones (the small Otters, Indian-like, philosophically accepted rain or shine) shouts of revelry could be heard coming from the pool, near the red iron bridge, that is formed by the creek on its merry way to Aspen Pond. The young Otters were all water-dogs and the pool was the scene of their aquatic sports. They swam and frolicked in it, and they took fish out of it.

One afternoon a few days later I watched a cluster of the children scramble down the hillside, carrying tin cans full of bait, and armed with their fishing poles. I began to wonder where my own tackle was when Mickey Otter rapped at our kitchen door. "Hello," I said. "Want to borrow some hooks and sinkers?"

"No," he replied, solemnly. "Ma wants ta know if you could borry William an old suitcase that ain't much good."

"Certainly, but why ain't—why aren't you fishing?"

"Oh, Geoff's gotta bite, and he won't let us in the krick till he ketches it. 'Fraid we'll scare it away."

"Does William need the suitcase right away? I don't know where we keep our bags. I could bring it over later."

"He don't need it untill tomorrer noontime."

"All right then, let's see how Geoff's making out with his bite." Mickey trotted down to the bridge with me. Geoff stood knee deep in the pool, fingering his line attached to a short willow pole. His small brothers and sisters, huddled on the damp bank, were watching the cork bob up and down, confidently waiting for him to pull out a fish. He did not disappoint them. A few minutes later he detached a fine sunfish from his hook.

"Congratulations, Geoff. And how are you?" I hadn't seen Geoff for several days, and we were very good friends.

"Oh, livin' in hope, an' dyin' in despair," he replied.

Geoff looked very gloomy. After he had re-baited his hook, and thrown out his line again, he went on with his complaint, as I knew he would.

"William lost his job in the pottery, so there won't be no more money comin' in from him. It's a good thing fishin's free, or maybe we'd stop eatin'. If it ain't one thing it's another."

I wondered if there was something around Red Maples we could dig up for William to do, until he found another job.

"William got fired," said Geoff. "He knocked a big dago down."

"He knocked him *out*," put in Mickey.

"And it served 'em right, too," said Geoff.

William was a tall, strapping fellow, but quiet and peace-loving; hardly the type to go around knocking people out. "An' Mum's decided, long as he's outta work, he might jist as well make himself useful and go up north an' find Calvin," Geoff went on. "Somebody seen him up in Watertown."

"That's why she wants ya ta borry him the suitcase," explained Mickey.

Geoff, not seeming to be in a communicative mood, lent himself strictly to the business of catching more fish; there was a school of sunfish playing around his hook. I decided to look in on Mrs. Otter, and some of the children climbed up the hill with me. Mrs. Otter put me in the rocker on the verandah, and Molly at once got into my lap. My hostess then disappeared, returning with a tumbler of Mr. Otter's cider. It was thin and dry, and tasted a bit like champagne.

I learned all the latest news while Molly went through my pockets—a veritable treasure hunt for her. The twins had been licked for stealing and playing with matches; Mickey had disgraced himself by getting sick in bed as a result of eating too many green cherries; and the baker's boy had refused to leave bread because there was no money to pay the bill. "I'd likta bust in his

head, and then tell 'em ta go ta hell," growled Mickey. "We been buyin' bread offen him for a coupla years, and when onct we ain't got no money, he wouldn't leave no bread. The bastard," he added, under his breath.

"Baker's boy leave no bread, me bake it," said Mrs. Otter, rocking contentedly. "Make no difference in my yonk life." This time she was cleaning dandelion greens as she entertained me, half a dozen white Leghorn hens picking at the leaves she discarded and dropped on the verandah floor at her feet. The Otters were having a dish for supper they hadn't enjoyed for a long time, she told me: potato peelings boiled into a sort of mush, and flavored with bacon drippings. Ordinarily, the hens got the peelings. I stayed for an hour, while Mrs. Otter talked about life in the old country, and the experiences of her family knocking around Pennsylvania, their home before they migrated to New York State. She told me, too, how worried she felt about Calvin.

Every time a car passed down the valley road, all the Otters stretched their necks to see if it would stop at the foot of the hill to let out Calvin. It was the first time one of the family had ever gone away, and the children, explained Mrs. Otter, couldn't understand it.

Where was Calvin sleeping? Who washed his clothes? Woke him up mornings? Who took care of him when he got sick? Who cooked his meals? They were all anxious that William start out, with my suitcase, to find Calvin and bring him home. They were so sure William could find him that now that the day for his departure had been set, they felt Calvin was as good as home already.

William came over that evening for the suitcase—a little reluctantly, I could tell by his approach. I guessed he would have preferred to send one of the boys, and that he had come at the express wish of his mother. I had become friends with all the Otters, only William had held off a little, at first. I often found his dark eyes playing on me doubtfully when I visited with his family.

He must have wondered why I came so often, and what it was I found at Otter Hill. He might have wondered if I didn't privately

think that a barefooted woman, who said "me go" and "me no go" and who nursed a baby while entertaining a stranger, wasn't really a funny spectacle.

William was very proud of his family, and I knew he didn't want them to be exploited, or to become the source of amusement to a stranger. I only wished I could have shown him how much I enjoyed my talks with his mother, the company of his small brothers and sisters, and how greatly I was indebted to all of them. They were doing so much more for me than I was doing for them. It is true, they put their cows in our pasture, used our barn; we sent over food and clothes and gave them things we didn't want or need—but they were the great donors. They were helping restore my health. They had turned out to be exactly the medicine, the diversion, which I had been ordered to find.

My small part in the war in China had left me physically and nervously sick. I hadn't slept naturally for months; woke out of drugged slumber with a heart racing and pounding against unidentified fright. My dreams were horrible travesties of things I had seen and experienced in Hong Kong, in Burma, in Chungking. Now the family was helping me regain my balance. There were so many Otters, and all of them, from the baby up, looked at the world out of such clear, fearless eyes. Mrs. Otter would not accept the abnormal, hence it ceased to exist. The Otters commenced to slay the chimeras engendered by a sick imagination, an exacerbated nervous system, as effectively as dragons were slain by heroes of old. Every time I left Otter Hill, I was a better man, and a stronger one. That is what the Otters were doing for me . . .

William looked about our sitting room with quiet appreciation. He seemed perfectly at home, without being too much at home. We had a drink. That helped loosen his tongue, and besides, Katy wasn't there to listen. Otherwise, William might not have related to me so much of his personal history. He seemed quite ashamed to be out of a job, and, to put himself in the correct light, anxious to explain how he had come to lose it.

It was like this: William preferred farming it in spring and

summer and fall, but in the wintertime he worked for fairly good wages in the village pottery. He had given his age to the employment manager as twenty-five; that meant a better job and better pay. Physically, William was a fully matured man. Having done farm work since boyhood, he owned a good physical development added to a naturally fine physique. The pottery accepted him as a man of the age he claimed.

Among the hands at the pottery was a sprinkling of Germans, Czechs, Italians, Poles and even a Russian or two. Some of them made up a distinctly communistic element. They sneered at William because, very outspokenly, he chose first to be an American and then a Czech. He often preached love for America over love for one's old country, and this had made him unpopular with some of the hands. An opportunity soon came for them to get back at him.

The light work at the pottery was performed by girls, most of whom were quiet and ladylike. There were, however, a number of formidable specimens among them who boldly besieged the young men for "dates," and were often rudely refused. William, having been gently reared by Mrs. Otter, looked askance in their direction. He had never taken one of them out, and this was considered curious in such a husky young fellow, who ought to be thinking of nothing but the girls and good times with them.

"What's the matter?" sneered Rip Pizzica, the "dago"—an expugilist and wrestler. "Ain't the girls around here good enough for you? Maybe you want a date with that stuck-up Priscilla Durston. Her old lady usta own the pottery, and I guess maybe she's good enough for you, but you ain't good enough for her, not by a long shot."

"You go to hell," said William, quietly.

When the whistle blew at noon, the men dropped their tools, devouring thick wedges of sandwiches that were generously finger-printed with pottery grime before they were washed down. They argued politics and world affairs and it seemed to William that some of them were against everything this country stood for. When

they got tired of discussing politics, they discussed sex and watched the girls go by, making comments on them, some complimentary, many otherwise—all brutally frank. William had no store of personal anecdote to add to the tales of sexual escapades recounted, and in this, too, he was considered strange.

"I don't believe you ever had no woman," said Rip, one day.

"No, I never did," William admitted.

Pizzica put down his sandwich, into which he was just about to sink his teeth. He quite forgot to close his mouth; it remained open at least for thirty seconds, a perfect register of speechless disbelief. Then he let out a tremendous bellow, after which he communicated the astounding news to his nearest companion. He picked up his sandwich and tore it in half with his powerful teeth and jaw. "Twenty-five years old, big and strong, and he ain't never had no woman," he jeered. Rip was inclined to feel a little angry about it.

The news spread through the pottery, and William was soon looked on as a curiosity. He gathered that he was the only uninitiated male past twenty on the payroll, not at all human—probably an abnormal decrepit of some kind. The state of his innocence became known to the girls, too, and he had to put up with endless winks and covert remarks, not only behind his back, but openly as well. His virginity was regarded by turns as an amusing, then as a painful blemish upon his character.

Very soon the men were united in a determined effort to make a real man out of William. He was encouraged to approach this promising girl or that one. The men gave him addresses of various houses; all one needed was a little money. When William came to work in the morning, Rip Pizzica would demand to know, in a voice loud enough for everybody to hear, whether he had by any chance become a real man the night before. William was too honest and too proud to make pretenses of a conquest not actually achieved, and since the rallying had gone beyond the funny stage, and, with Rip Pizzica anyway, had taken on an element of viciousness, he frequently felt keen embarrassment and mortification. "What you savin' yourself for, Mr. William?" asked Rip, one

morning. "Priscilla Durston? Or you gonna wait til you're married?"

"Maybe I will," said William.

"Lookit your kid brother Calvin," persisted Rip. "He gets in trouble right under that old priest's nose and then beats it before he's marched to the altar. Now, that's what I call smart. All the men in your family ain't deadheads."

"Calvin doesn't have to marry anyone," said William.

"Is that so? I heard different," sneered Rip. "Then there's your old man. All he's gotta do is put his shoes under your old lady's bed, and she ups and has another baby."

William took a healthy swing at Rip (who weighed two hundred and fifty pounds) and knocked him out. The superintendent, making his departmental rounds at the time, witnessed the incident, and William was discharged.

"I walked out and came darn near going to one of those places the men were always recommending, but I didn't," said William, ruefully.

"Well, you showed Pizzica you were a good man just the same, William," I said as he rose to say good night.

When Katy came home and I told her about it, she laughed until she cried. Then she became very serious. "Calvin gets into trouble because he chased around with a fast girl, William because he avoids them. But every boy has a right to one fast girl, I suppose," she added, thoughtfully.

I was amazed by this unexpected revelation in my wife's character. "Would you have encouraged him as the pottery workers did?"

"No, I guess not," she said. "I guess I should have tried to find the right girl for him."

"He'll find her soon enough," I said. "And then poor Mrs. Otter'll lose her right hand."

CHAPTER FIVE

History Is Made at Night

I drove to the village the next day, to put William on the Watertown bus and to see old Father Justin. Katy and I were anxious to know something about the history of Red Maples, and the priest, one of the oldest residents in the country, was its greatest historian. He had settled in that community fifty years before, and I felt sure he would be able to tell me who had built our lovely old stone house, and something about the families who had lived in it.

There was no bus, due to a sudden change in the running schedule, so I drove William all the way to Watertown. I got back to the village in time to lunch with Father Justin. He partly satisfied my curiosity about Red Maples, and gave me his version of the reason for Calvin Otter's disappearance. With the news William had already imparted to me about his brother, I had Calvin's history right up to date.

Father Justin usually kept a boy in his house to do odd jobs around the place. The last incumbent had been Calvin, whose fate certainly was different from that of his predecessors; *they* usually went from their jobs to a seminary. Calvin's room in the priest's red brick house was cozy and comfortable, and the meals the housekeeper served were epicurean compared to those Mrs. Otter gave him at home. His venerable employer was always making nice presents to him, too: clothes, a camera, holy pictures, books. Calvin became very fond of the old man. He took care of the furnace, shoveled snow, scraped and painted woodwork, polished furniture, and sometimes helped the laborers in the new church Father Justin was building. William and Mary were bookworms, and the priest always seemed pleased when Calvin requested the loan of a book. He had access to the library at all times. Father Justin found time to teach Calvin a little Latin, and had tried to discover in the boy, without success, a vocation for the priesthood.

Father Justin was very popular in the village, with Protestants and Catholics alike. Past seventy-five, his figure was still erect and he walked with strident vigor. He had full, red lips, and eyes that glittered like the Ancient Mariner's when he promised brimstone and hellfire to transgressors. He gave generously to the poor from his private means. Calvin had been admonished never to send away a beggar who came to the door if the housekeeper was not there to feed him or give him some old clothes to put on his back. There was always the possibility that the ragged petitioner might be a saint or an angel in disguise, or even the Lord Jesus. Father Justin looked after everybody like the benevolent old tyrant he was. He read St. Augustine, Pascal, St. Theresa, and the flavor of the classics had crept into his speech.

On the village fringe, within sight of his red-brick dwelling, he had long ago planted a row of honey-locust trees, and, his years declining, watched them grow into green-golden maturity. Above them ran a steep embankment, the abandoned site of a suburban trolley line. Down the embankment's slopes in summer rippled woodbine, honeysuckle and trailers of purple-flowering raspberry. In fall it was sere with goldenrod, pale blue asters and blue and yellow grass.

The grassy promenade below the embankment, under the gracious honey locusts, was called Lovers' Lane, a spot much frequented by village sweethearts. On moonlight nights the exchange of kisses was so constant and so honest they could be heard above the whispering tree tops. Father Justin was an amateur astronomer, but when he watched the phases of the moon, it was not always with a purely scientific eye; it was rather with an anxiety as to how its glimpses of the earth might adversely affect the morals of his youthful flock.

On nights when its witchery was fairly irresistible—and on other nights as well—he patrolled the lane like an archangel at the gates of lost Eden, with his old cherry cane for a fiery sword. When he observed a couple he knew to be unmarried sitting under a tree on the grass, he gently shook his head and soberly approached

them. Then, upon the shoulders of the young man (and supposedly potential seducer) he placed his liver-spotted old hands—it was such a disarming gesture—and earnestly exhorted the pair to return at once to their respective homes, lest they succumb to the temptation that was so patently abroad. The young couple never received the mild harangue he delivered with resentment. There was merely an exchange of winks behind his back, and after he had gone away, the sweethearts usually vanished into some more secluded bower, where they were free from further interruption—and where their kisses probably tasted even sweeter. No doubt the solicitous old priest, by his interference and suggestion of moral danger, often placed some of his flock into even greater jeopardy.

One night that spring Father Justin, patrolling the lane, stumbled over a couple lying in the deep grass and fell. The next morning his ankle was swollen and he had to nurse it. The following evening there was a full spring moon, a very seductive moon, and he could not protect such of his flock as were exposed to its current witchery. But he could send somebody out as his emissary—he could send out young Calvin Otter.

Calvin had come into the priest's service with the reputation of being a wild young fellow. He was crazy about the girls and always willing to please them. They sought him out constantly for his gaiety, his good looks, his gallantry and dancing feet—Calvin was the best dancer in Smoky and near-by Happy Valley. Not only the country girls loved him, but the village belles as well. Not one of them had ever objected to being driven to the most fashionable village dance in Calvin Otter's old Model T truck, a broken down thing which had a habit of stalling every mile or two. Headstrong, stubborn, impulsive, generous, careless, Calvin was the antithesis of his brother William, so quiet, sober and trustworthy. That is, in all but looks. The brothers were so much alike physically, I had been told, that William was frequently mistaken for Calvin. "You're that wild Otter boy," people would say to him. William was too loyal to his brother to return: "No, it's my brother Calvin you mean." But Calvin, realizing he had much

to live up to as Father Justin's protégé and a member of his household, conscientiously reformed in many of his old wild ways—a sobering on his part which the priest attributed to the salutary influence of the church.

Father Justin dispatched Calvin to the lane that moonlight night. No doubt the boy hated his assignment. The old men who hung around King's General Store in the village gossiping could do a lot with a topic like that. But to Calvin's feudal mind the priest's word was law, and he went about his appointed business, however reluctantly. He tried his best, and then gave up. Everybody except Father Justin knew he was keeping company with a fast girl whom he had met at a dance in a roadhouse. The young couples he attempted to send away laughed at him. "Trying to clear out the place so you can have it all for yourself and Red, Calvin?" asked one young man, between kisses.

After midnight, Father Justin put down his book, turned off the library light. Then it occurred to him that he hadn't heard his boy come in. He forgot about his ankle, found his cherry cane and hobbled down to the lane. It was his strict rule that Calvin should not stay out after midnight.

Many were the whisperings, sighs, and soft murmurings that sweetened the breezes in Lovers' Lane that night. Father Justin sent away half a dozen couples with great dispatch and then came upon a pair half sitting, half lying on a rock, locked, abandoned in each other's arms. The priest briskly tapped the rock with his cane as a signal of his presence, and the young couple, startled, turned to face him. They were Calvin and his redhead.

Their clothes were much disarranged and unbuttoned; Father Justin could not determine whether they were rising from, or on the verge of plunging into the fiery pit from which it had been Calvin's appointed function to steer other potential sinners. He collared the boy, dragged him from the rock—Calvin fell in an abject heap at his feet. The girl was cool and impudent. When Father Justin recognized her to be the loose daughter of a notoriously loose mother he became very angry and soundly applied his

cherry cane to Calvin's back. The redheaded girl stood up before him defiantly but Calvin quailed and suffered, showing a surprising lack of spirit in one ordinarily so spirited. Seeing him humiliated and broken, she ran away. Father Justin marched Calvin to the house, formally dismissed him from his service, sent him to bed with the promise that next day he would return to Otter Hill in disgrace.

William said he guessed the prospect of facing his gentle mother under such a cloud was more than Calvin could bear. That very night he wrote a note to William and ran off. When Father Justin visited Mrs. Otter next day, he made her very sorrowful with the news of Calvin's defection and flight, but Mr. Otter gave a chuckle or two and was disposed to treat the matter lightly. He comforted Mrs. Otter as best he could, and said he only hoped the girl wouldn't follow Calvin. Maybe, he added, she wasn't so bad as Father Justin made her out.

A few days later Father Justin engaged some woodcutters to saw down the honey locusts in Lovers' Lane. That summer, the promenade became barren and sunstruck. It lost its charm for birds and little animals as well as lovers, who went elsewhere on the successive spring and summer nights.

"And what became of the redheaded girl?" asked Katy, after I had told her Calvin's story.

"I don't know where she is now, but I found out where she came from originally. Believe it or not, she was born in this very house."

"In Red Maples?" Katy gave me a queer look.

"Yes, Father Justin knew her grandfather and mother. And by the way, it would seem that Red Maples is appropriately named."

"Don't speak in riddles," said Katy, impatiently.

"It's a scarlet house—or was."

"I thought it was named for the red maple trees in front."

"Perhaps. But it used to have a very shady reputation—a secret our real estate agent didn't share with us. People coming and going all hours of the night, mysterious lights in the windows, hushed noises, soft music, revelry, nobody ever visible in the daytime—

perhaps that's why it was vacant so long. Katy, the place used to be a sort of roadhouse—or worse."

It was delightful to see Katy's attempt to look sincerely shocked when she really felt amused.

"Well, I did think the little sitting room had a flavor of immorality when I first saw it," she said. "The extraordinary arrangement of the mirrors, the divan, the Venuses. Still, I'm glad we left that room exactly as we found it. It's perfect. The loveliest room in the house."

Katy and I were in the kitchen. She was ironing one of my shirts.

"Listen," I said, "and I'll tell you all about it. The history of Red Maples was uneventful until about twenty-five years ago when a man named Corry bought the place. He was the principal of the high school and president of the board of education. It seemed there was a streak of badness in his family. He had been embezzling the school funds and meanwhile, evidently to protect himself, signed Red Maples over to a very enterprising daughter of his. Things caught up with him and he was sent to jail for three years. When he got out of jail, his daughter wouldn't let him in the house—turned him off at the door, homeless, penniless, and on the brink of mental illness. Perhaps she thought his presence would interfere with the successful business she had established here—the one I described. Old Man Corry eventually lost his mind, and went around threatening to burn the house down. He was sent away to some institution and then released—considered harmless. He floated around the north country for years, becoming quite a character in some localities. Early this spring he turned up in this neighborhood again after an absence of nearly twenty years—still mad, looking for Red Maples so he could apply the torch. Katy, we have a pyromaniac at our heels ready to burn the roof over our heads."

Katy tried to look alarmed, but merely succeeded in looking astonished.

Still, she made a pretense of glancing furtively out of the window.

"Father Justin said he couldn't hurt a fly."

"What became of his daughter? She sounds like Regan and Goneril."

"She lives up north somewhere—in one of the lake resorts. She's rather well known. She had a daughter, born in Red Maples, who lived here until she was four or five. She, too, showed up in the village this spring, although she isn't aware that Old Corry is her grandfather. The name isn't the same and she'd been told by her mother that the old man was dead. But they call her Red, and she's the girl who helped Calvin Otter go astray."

"How extraordinary," said Katy, putting down the flatiron. "Will you sleep nights knowing about the old man, and his intentions?"

"Of course. What crazy, completely disoriented old man would recognize a house he hadn't seen for about twenty years, especially after another wing has been added, part of the original structure as he knew it torn down, the trees all grown up and shrubs and vines clinging to it changing its very face? He might have passed it a dozen times without recognizing it. He *has* passed it, Katy," I admitted. "I've seen him go by a dozen times. Next time I'll call you."

"Do," said Katy, cheerfully.

She hung a shirt over a chair to dry and picked up another to iron.

CHAPTER SIX

River Lena

Y*ears* ago, somebody had planted an old-fashioned garden at Red Maples—peonies, sweet william, bleeding heart, heliotrope—and a week on my hands and knees had finally delivered from near suffocation the clumps of hardy perennials which had survived the neglect. I was sitting under the arbor resting after

my final bout of weeding, and Katy was circumnavigating the house, admiring the fenestry (you can always tell an old house by its windows), the two red maples after which the place had been named (presumably) and the fine flagstone walk with delicate grass and heartsease growing in the cracks. "Let's go indoors," said Katy, presently. "It's too warm outdoors." Although the stone porch on the sunny side of the house could at times blister the touch, the interior of Red Maples was always cool as a nymph's grotto. We were having lunch and looking out of the window when the twins, Davy and Dennis, trotted past our house calling, "Rosie, Rosie, come home, come home!"

Katy snatched a bag of candy and ran outside to give it to the twins. Shifting uneasily on their bare feet, they thanked her gravely and said: "We hafta go now. Rosie's lost, and we been lookin' for her all day. We think she mighta got drowned in the swamp." The twins were very timid, and they quickly went off. Geoff or Mickey ordinarily would have stayed for a visit.

"Rosie's lost, and may have drowned," cried Katy, as she came running in. "They've been looking for her all day. That's what all the commotion must have been about on the hill. Why don't you go over and see what you can do? Wait a minute; I have something for them, although they probably don't feel like eating."

But there were two Rosies in the Otter family. When I had climbed up the hill, I learned that it was Rosie, the cow, that was lost—not Rosie, Rolf's twin. She had wandered away, in search of greener pastures, no doubt. The children had been combing the neighboring fields and woods since early morning. Happily, Geoff soon found her on the edge of the big tamarack swamp, evidently bent on crossing it, and everybody was overjoyed when he came leading her up the hill. More than one horse and cow had disappeared forever in that deep, almost inaccessible swamp. Mrs. Otter ordered the boys to fill buckets and give Rosie a good washing, for she was black with muck and mooing disconsolately. After she had been cleaned up, the little girls wove a chain of buttercups and daisies to hang around her neck (the Otters were very fond of their

cow) and then they all gathered in the sunshine on the lawn to celebrate her return.

They celebrated with the cakes Katy had sent over. Mrs. Otter, probably believing I was the kind of person who liked to see his beneficiaries benefit before his very eyes, didn't keep the cakes for supper, but, using her apron, wiped the mud off a kitchen knife with which the girls had been slicing mud pies, cut them up and served them on the spot. A little dirt wouldn't hurt anybody, she averred, when fastidious Jennie offered to wash the knife under the pump. Poor little girl! It was almost tragic for her to be the only really fastidious one on the hilltop. Surrounded by a flock of her small dirty-faced brothers and sisters, she looked as if she were merely visiting there, and belonged to quite another family!

I wished Katy had been along, to watch her cakes disappear. She often complained that she was tired of throwing out pies and cakes I refused to eat. I sat on the chopping block, enjoying the spectacle of the family at which I had not yet ceased to marvel—and never would. Walter was reading a book—he was the quiet, studious one—and Alix, crazy about birds ever since anybody could remember, was drawing a picture of an eagle attacking an osprey with a fish in its talons. Rolf, the family athlete, had borrowed Mrs. Otter's scissors and was cutting pictures of prize fighters and baseball players out of a heap of old newspapers, and pasting them into an old book. Davy and Dennis were wrestling in the grass and Geoff had climbed up into the chokecherry tree. He hung from a limb by his knee, playing Tarzan, and every little while he let out a long, blood-curdling Oeeeeoooooooo. Fluffy began to bark, and Mickey, who was stringing up the wash line between the thorn-apple tree and the lilac bush, called out: "We got comp'ny. Here comes old Corry."

"Corry's an old man," explained Walter, putting down *Tom the Bootblack*. "He used to live in this house before we did and we let him stay. It would have been cruel to turn him out." I had already noticed how correctly the twelve-year-old youngster used his words, trying to speak like the characters in the books he read.

Walter, too, with his fastidious speech and manners, seemed to belong to another family.

"But I thought it was empty when you bought it," I said, keenly anticipating meeting face to face the old gentleman whose ambition it was to burn Red Maples over our heads.

"We did too," said Geoff, dropping out of the tree in the grass at my side. "Then we begin to hear funny noises in the nighttime and we found out somebody was stayin' in our cellar. Not that anything was ever took, though. Final'y Mum put a row of Schnitz beer bottles on the ledge inside the cellar window. The window swings inward, and one night, when Corry climbed in—he hadda give the window a push first—all the bottles fell down and made a big noise. That's how we found him. He was so scared, he said the beetle started crawlin' round in his head right off."

"And he kin come anytime he wants," said Mickey. "He ain't a bad ol' man, even if he hates money. Says if he ever found a pile of it, he'd burn it up. Says it's the root of all ebil. Now if that don't beat anything I ever heerd of."

"When he sees you, he'll be a little scared," Geoff explained. "He'll think you come here ta put him back in the crazy house."

"In that case I think I'd better be going," I said. "I can take the back path down the hill." Corry's head and shoulders were now visible over the slant of the hillside.

"No, no," remonstrated Mrs. Otter, who was busy cutting salt sacks apart and converting them into dish towels. "He be little scare at first, then awright. Make friends fast. Corry nice old man, just have a few wheels goink round in head, that all. Could not hurt a fly." I recalled that Father Justin had similarly described him.

When the old man espied the cluster of Otters on the lawn, his steps quickened. He joyfully approached the family; it must have been like coming home. There were so many Otters, he did not at once perceive a stranger in their midst. Evidently, his eyesight was also poor. He was quite a fine-looking old man, except for an undefinable quality—perhaps the sort of queer fixedness about his

eyes, an aimlessness, a looseness in his movements—that marked him for one mentally lost.

He was tall and stooped and not very robust. His hair was thin and white and a thick white fuzz grew out of his ears. Wisps of grass and hay clung to him. He wore khaki-colored pants, a plaid shirt, heavy army shoes. He seemed clean as a stone scoured by the rain and wind. There was a pathetic resignation, docility, about his manner; one felt that if a chain were placed around his neck, he would meekly follow.

The old man's cheeks were wrinkled and rosy as a winter apple's. The surprising thing about him was his hands—brown and strong-looking—the hands of a young man. Mrs. Otter asked one of the boys to fetch a chair for him and Molly put down her mud pie and trotted over to his side. "Poor Corry," piped the little calliope in her throat. "You're such a sweet old man. You wouldn't hurt a fly. Nobody'll put you in the crazy house."

Old Corry put his hand on her head; so far he had smiled gently, but said nothing.

Mrs. Otter said hush to Molly and gave Corry the last morsel of cake. Breaking off small pieces with his thumb and forefinger, he ate them down with relish, carefully picking up a crumb or two which had fallen in the grass to put them into his mouth.

"I am not an old man, little girl," he said, gently. "Nor a crazy one. Consider the pastry I have just eaten. Many years ago, a kind woman in the village gave me a cake quite as sweet, with a glass of fresh milk. Today, I have eaten this cake with fully as much pleasure. Hence I am not growing old. We lose the bodily appetites first."

I was astonished at the quality of the old man's speech—for some reason I had expected toads, and not jewels, to fall from his lips. Then I recalled that he had been principal of the village high school, long ago. I had not only seen old Corry shamble past our house after dark, but once or twice I'd seen him standing—a lonely figure—on a valley hilltop greeting the sunrise and shouting some mad, rapturous apostrophe to it. Again, in the evening just before dark I'd seen him stalking across a field and vanishing quite wraith-

like in the mist; and several times during the day, skulking along the edge of a wood like a furtive animal keeping near cover.

The Otters resumed their various activities without paying further attention to old Corry. Presently he commenced to peer at me out of old blue eyes that were watering now, but it took him a long while to make out that he had not seen me before. Then, actually aware of the presence of a stranger, he commenced to shake violently. "Who is this man?" he asked. "I do not say his face is unkind, but one time, a lady with a gentle expression, carrying a black book looking like a Bible, with a golden cross hanging around her neck, tried to persuade my friends to send me to an institution."

Mrs. Otter put a reassuring hand on his arm. "Never mind, Corry. Mr. Curley good friend. Do you no harm. Geoff," she said, briskly, "fetch Corry glass cider, make him feel good."

"Thank you, thank you," said the old man in his childish treble. "That I will gladly accept. But I am confused and frightened, and will draw apart a little to reflect. The noises in my head were very bad last night, and I did not rest well." My presence seemed to make the old man very unhappy, and for once I heartily wished I were back at Red Maples, cultivating my tomato plants.

"What were the noises like this time, Corry?" asked Geoff, with interest.

"They were like the wailing of the wind, the roaring of the sea. They were not like the whine of a buzz saw in the woods this time. But I have the strength to bear it. It is only when the beetle walks in my head, that I am badly off." Mrs. Otter shook her head in vigorous affirmation and urged Corry to sit apart, if he so desired, to pull himself together.

"Wonder how the beetle gits in Corry's brain," whispered Dennis to Davy. "D'ya s'pose it crawls in his ears? I swalleyed a waterbug down in the krick onct, but it went down my belly and got smothered. It wasn't like the time I swalleyed the plumb stone, and Mickey said a plumb tree would grow up in me."

Corry withdrew to the verandah where he sat in Mrs. Otter's rocker and drank the glass of cider Geoff gave him. His eyes were

intent on my back and I could hear him talk to himself in a fussy, querulous way.

"Corry lived sommers 'round here 'bout twenny-five years ago," explained Geoff. "Then he disappeared. He showed up this spring and now he's lookin' for his house. Ain't it too bad? When you see him travelin' round the country, that's what he's doin'—lookin' for his house. When ya ask him wherry goes in the wintertime, he says, 'Where the birds go.' But Father Justin boards him out with a couple up on a farm near Watertown. In summer, they let him wander round where he pleases, and he spends some nights in our barn. The cellar's too damp."

Geoff climbed up into the chokecherry tree again and resumed his Tarzan role. "Hush, Geoff," called Mrs. Otter. "Corry have enough sounds in head, without you make more. You act like that up in tree, they take *you* to crazy house, or think you monkey and put you in circus."

Geoff could see farther than anybody else. "Bet nobody kin guess who's comin' now," he cried, his voice charged with sudden excitement.

"Who?" cried the Otters, and a dozen necks were stretched to see.

"William!" shouted Geoff, scrambling, half falling out of the chokecherry tree.

"Has he got Calvin with him?" cried Walt.

"Not unless Calvin's dressed up like a girl," snapped Geoff.

"Gee, it is a girl, ain't it?" said Mickey, for now two figures could be seen over the curve of the hillside.

"Well, it's easy ta see it ain't Calvin," retorted Geoff, angrily.

William was carrying my suitcase and leading a girl up the hill. They came very slowly, evidently with great reluctance, and obviously uncertain as to their welcome. Nobody ran to meet them, which was strange. The Otters stood and stared, struck dumb with amazement. No car had stopped at the foot of Otter Hill, so the young couple must have walked the six miles from the village. The girl was badly frightened, and William held his mouth tight. I

fancied he was going through a terrible ordeal. People being led to the guillotine must have looked like William.

"Where's Calvin?" demanded Geoff, at once taking his big brother to account. "Mum sent you up north to bring *him* back."

"Didn't cha find him?" demanded Mickey.

"No, I didn't," said William, quietly. "I looked—but—didn't."

"And you found *her* instead," cried Geoff.

"Yes, I did," said William, running his tongue over his dry lips.

"What cha bring her *here* for? Does she plan on stayin'?"

"I want her to," faltered William.

He put down the suitcase, and looked appealingly at his mother, who was watching him almost timidly. I am sure this was the first time William had ever failed his family in anything. His dark blue eyes were almost black with emotion; I wished I hadn't been visiting Otter Hill, to see him come home like that, to the disappointment of his family. "This is Lena, Mum," he said, in a way which suggested an apology, and a vast plea. Lena watched Mrs. Otter with enormous blue eyes. Her mouth was tremulous and she looked fascinated—fascinated and frightened—as if her life depended upon what was going to happen to her within the next few minutes.

Mickey walked away in disgust, and sat next to old Corry on the verandah. The old man shifted uneasily, peering at the scene out of his dim eyes. "Another stranger," I heard him mutter. "This is not well. The boy is sent to fetch his brother home, and brings back a girl instead. His mother should not have allowed him to go away. The other boy would have returned to his family. He was strong and normal and healthy in mind. If he had sinned, the flesh is purified so easily. It is only a contaminated heart and mind that cannot be cleansed. But I am becoming confused, my boy, and must lie down where it is quiet and peaceful, before the beetle crawls in my brain."

"You climb right up in the hayloft and have a good snooze, Corry," said Mickey.

The livestock came up to inspect the strange girl. Her clothes and shoes, like William's, were dusty and she looked desperately

tired. She was a limpidly lovely thing, with her wind-blown hair, frightened eyes, and tremulous lips that suggested invisible kisses. Certainly, the dress she was wearing hadn't come from King's General Store in the village. Fluffy sniffed at her daintily, the goat baaed out his unappeased curiosity, the chickens clucked distrustfully—but chickens always have a stupidly distrustful look about them. At first sight, nobody seemed to approve. Lena might just as well have walked down the hillside again. The children stared at her, not in the friendly way they had with strangers. William had no business bringing back this girl instead of Calvin. Nobody could take Calvin's place.

Mrs. Otter continued to regard William searchingly and tenderly, but did not acknowledge Lena in any way.

"Is she really gonna stay here?" demanded Mickey.

"If Mum lets her," said William.

"If I was Mum, I'd make ya take her right back where she come from."

"Secont the motioned," said Geoff.

"Oh, let her stay," said kindhearted Walt. "There's always room for one more."

"But where's she gonna sleep, I'd like ta know," cried Geoff. "You know we ain't got hardly 'nough room as it is. She could sleep in the barn, I suppose, but it wouldn't be no fun for her, if Corry's 'round and the beetle starts crawlin' in his brain."

"One more mouf ta feed," said Mickey.

Lena's mouth fluttered; she tried to speak but the words didn't come. She looked about her wildly, as if she wanted to run away—run down the hillside she had just climbed. William held her hand more tightly, and drew her closer to his side. His lips were firm now, his eyes growing stormy. He was preparing to defend himself.

It was only because of their crushing disappointment in William for having failed to bring Calvin home that the Otters had all joined, for a few moments, in this gruesome business of intemperate reproach. Had Calvin not gone away, they would have welcomed the girl gladly as William's friend. And how sorry they were, before

the summer was over, that they hadn't been nicer to Lena when she came to Otter Hill. Mrs. Otter told me she would reproach herself as long as she lived.

She gave out a little hiss which silenced the small Otters and then, after taking a sweeping look at the girl, which quite repudiated her, she put one hand on William's arm, meeting the look of supplication in his eyes. He made an appealing boyish figure. The scene was such a private one, I picked up the cake plates, shook hands with William, gave the girl a smile—the only one she'd received since climbing up the hill—and said good-by. Geoff, too disgusted to remain, walked down to the red iron bridge with me, taking no pains to conceal his annoyance with his big brother, whose ardent admirer he had always been.

"Well, William's got a girl now," he observed, gloomily. "Jist like Calvin. Maybe he'll go away, too, and then he won't be able ta help Mum no more. And he'll never be an aviator, not if he lives ta be a hundred, and you know we'll all git in this war sooner or later. He'll prob'bly end up in the *infantry*." Geoff had always been a keen supporter of William's ambition to fly. "All the fellas 'round here have big ideas; they're gonna be aviators, they're gonna be inventors, they're gonna go in business for themselves and do this or do that. Then they go out and git girls, and never amount to nothin'. Raise babies steada learnin' somethin'."

"Well, are they married?" asked Katy, when I got home, and told her all about it.

"How do I know?" I said. "It looks to me as if William brought her home for his mother to approve of. And while I won't say they ought to be married—if they're not—I should say he's too far gone to be influenced by his mother's disapproval."

"What's she like?"

"Another redhead."

"Oh," said Katy.

I had to laugh at the implication in Katy's exclamation. She knew that when I was a little boy, I used to think that all red-headed girls were bad. I ended up by marrying one.

"Is she pretty?" said Katy.

"Beautiful, beautiful. But I didn't want to stare at her. Everybody was staring at her, and she didn't know where to look."

"Hmmm," said Katy, distrustfully.

"I saw old Corry this afternoon, too—the old man who wants to burn this house down. It seems he's been sleeping nights in the Otters' barn. A fisherman I spoke to down by the creek this morning told me that one day he saw the old fellow take a dollar bill out of his pocket, tear it up into bits and throw them into the creek with a handful of coins. Mickey said he hates money."

"Not so peculiar after all in a crazy old man who was sent to jail because of it," murmured Katy.

I was still thinking about William and the Otters and Lena when I went to bed, wishing I could do something to help them. I felt increasingly grateful to the family on the windy hilltop, and was at times almost ashamed for the diversion they afforded me. So much of it was at the expense of the various shifts their poverty made necessary.

When my plane crashed in enemy-occupied China and I was taken prisoner, my Jap captors had marched my two surviving companions and myself to the village jail. A Chinese family had just been murdered by a bunch of drug-drunk soldiers. The decapitated heads of the family were placed in a row on a stone wall, mother's, father's on each end, the children's in between. The macabre sight often haunted my dreams; sometimes Katy had to wake me out of a nightmare. Once the Japs were forcing me and my companions to play baseball with the heads of the butchered Chinese. But of late the dream had changed, and this is what it had become: there was the same stone wall, but with a smiling Otter family lined against it, the Japs playing machine-gun fire upon them. The Otters, however, were bullet-proof; the bullets bounced away harmlessly and, boomerang-like, hit back and killed the Japs. The Otters then opened the doors of my prison, releasing myself and my friends, whereupon we all drove back to flight headquarters together in the Otter Model T, singing and

shouting in the highest spirits and drinking Mr. Otter's hard cider, with Mme. Chiang Kai-shek (I had once had tea with her in Chungking) filling up the glasses!

CHAPTER SEVEN

Not to Read but to Have

Katy was a little shy with strangers and in new places. I had been trying to get her to call at Otter Hill, and she hid her timidity under a pretense of formality. She said it was Mrs. Otter's social obligation to call at Red Maples first, since we were newcomers in the neighborhood. What Emily Post would have said, I don't know.

But one day about that time, she met Mr. Otter and William on the road. They were on their way home from a country auction, where they had purchased a bookcase and a dozen white Leghorn hens. Katy must have found the encounter a pleasant one, for her eyes were doubly bright when she told me about it.

"Mr. Otter said he wished there had been a piano at the auction, too," she told me. "It seems that the girl William brought home—Lena—plays. And Mary wants to take lessons."

The bookcase, Katy went on, was a monstrosity in black walnut that she thought weighed a ton, and the hens, all of them cackling wildly, were imprisoned under its glass doors. The men carried it horizontally, William, leading the way, grasping it by the legs and Mr. Otter bringing up the rear. They had carried it in this awkward fashion over almost three miles of dusty roads on the warmest day of the month. Katy ran into them while they were resting a bit; she said they were the two hottest-looking men she had ever seen. "They're such strong, well-built men," she murmured, absently.

"Strong enough to have carried the piano, too, if they'd bought one, I have no doubt," I said.

Katy had just come out of a roadside meadow, with a basket full of wild plants and small shrubs and evergreen seedlings she had dug up for a native garden she was planting—a wildflower garden, as she called it—an idea she'd gotten out of a woman's magazine. Mr. Otter and William, recognizing her, bowed in courtly fashion and she was moved to forget her timidity and speak to them. Mr. Otter, she thought, had great personal distinction, even when stripped to his undershirt, and William, she said, besides having such a good voice had the longest eyelashes she had ever seen in a man. "They must be great lovers of books to carry that monstrous bookcase over three miles of country roads on such a hot day," added Katy, enthusiastically.

"And probably even greater lovers of fried chicken," I said. "It looks to me as if they bought the bookcase purposely to fetch the hens home in."

"I prefer to believe they bought the hens so they could fill up the bookcase with books they buy with the egg money," returned Katy. "Evidently they're very nice people and I'd like to do something for them."

"And what would you like to do?"

"I'd like to fill up that bookcase with books. We have too many as it is. Good books we don't even look at any more."

I knew Katy was thinking about our sets of George Eliot, Henry James, Sir Walter Scott, Dickens, James Fenimore Cooper, the Harvard Classics. This stately company was herded in our attic, gathering dust and mold.

It turned out that Mr. Otter was much interested in Katy's projected wildflower garden, and in the possibilities of a bit of marshland on our place it was her ambition to cultivate. Katy was afraid, though, to tackle the near-by swamp and bogs for native aquatic plants, most of which grew in black muck and swampy waterholes, where one had to combat man-eating mosquitoes, snapping turtles and frequently consort with huge blacksnakes, the kind Geoff had killed the day I met him. Katy was even fearful of setting out

into the hemlock woods off the dirt road near our house; and I told her she must have been afraid of meeting a bear. The last one seen in this vicinity was in 1882.

It is strange. Before we were married, Katy had thoroughly convinced me that, like myself, she was a lover of the wild, silent places.

I am entomologically, botanically, and zoologically minded. I always noticed the flora and fauna of new country before I observed its human inhabitants. I'd get down on my hands and knees and crawl through a field of briers, burdocks, nettles, and other stick-tights to catch a snake or an insect, and I'd risk quicksands and brave quagmires and muck-holes to study an interesting plant or tree growing in a swamp. I've broken limbs on wild chases after butterflies and birds, and once, when I was eight years old, I nearly drowned trying to pick a water lily. After they fished me out, they had to use the pulmotor on me.

I had been persuaded to believe that my hobbies and recreations would be Katy's—that we would go down through life sharing and enjoying them together. But subsequently I was forced to acknowledge that she had practiced dissimulation during my courtship of her, just to convince me that we had many tastes in common. Experts in matrimony still seem to feel that a community of tastes is necessary to a successful marriage. After we were married I soon learned that Katy hated everything about the great outdoors except mild sunshine, bright moonshine, flowers, well-cut lawns and neatly clipped hedges.

Small wonder then, why I still marvel and admire her heroism for accompanying me (before our marriage, and usually chaperoned by an elderly scientific couple) on all sorts of treks, canoe trips, drives into wet lowlands and torrid climates, expeditions up and down steaming tropical rivers and creeks, through miasmatic jungles and swamp forests, after which my pockets and bags were stuffed full of the crawling, biting, spitting, and stinging specimens for which she then pretended such fine enthusiasm—and which

today she plainly regards with horror. Frankly, Katy turns pale at the sight of a snake these days, and she will not touch the prettiest and most delicate-looking insect.

I remembered, with chagrin, the time a pretty little garter snake crawled into our kitchen while she was baking a cake.

Katy screamed, grabbed the teakettle and deluged the harmless invertebrate with boiling water. I maintained that if the small snake had to die at all, it should have died a less unnatural, more dignified death. A snake should be decapitated. It lends its long neck so conveniently to the ax.

The Otters, of course, are completely at one with nature. Mrs. Otter I thought of as Mother Ceres. Little Molly, like myself, will chase a snake across the creek. One day Rosie and Rolf caught a huge snapping turtle in Happy Valley, five miles away, and took turns carrying it to Otter Hill where they exhibited it in a cage made out of chicken wire. Mr. Otter commenced to stop at our house now with floral offerings for Katy's wildflower and swamp gardens which he had dug out of bogs and morasses by the roots.

He brought many fine, and some rare plants, most of them showing little green shoots; the season was still early. He came with clumps of lady's-slippers, which filled Katy with joy; she had been hunting them with little success all her life. He brought a barrel of marsh marigold, pitcher plants, arrowhead, pickerelweed, rose mallow. Later on, from sunswept banks in the woods, he brought sprouting spring beauties, hepaticas, wood anemones and adder's-tongue. He dug up trilliums from the silent forest floors, Dutchman's-breeches, purple-flowering raspberry, squawberries, wild geraniums and bloodroot. In a little while, Katy had a specimen of every fern native to that countryside growing in her garden.

Every time Mr. Otter (he was often accompanied by William) came with these bosky contributions, he stayed and planted them for Katy.

She, as a return compliment, gave Mr. Otter books for his book-case, which he shyly accepted.

Mr. Otter showed his interest in Katy's garden by moving,

single-handed, huge boulders—regular monoliths I couldn't even budge—to wherever she wanted them. The young boys built a stone wall for her, and dug up woodbine, bittersweet, wild clematis, bitter nightshade and purple vetch to plant and climb against it. Thus assisted, Katy's horticultural ambitions waxed, and, as if it were a tiger, she commenced to talk about taming the untamable fringed gentian—for Mr. Otter had described a flower he'd seen growing in the swamp last September. It was blue, like sky. It have fringed petals, like little carnation. It open up and smile only when sun was shining. It like to keep his feet in damp place.

"Yes, that must have been a fringed gentian," Katy said, enthusiastically. "I've read poetry about them by Emily Dickinson and William Cullen Bryant, but have never seen one outside a florist's shop in New York and they were poor specimens."

"Is Mr. Otter reading the books you gave him?" I asked.

"You know he hasn't got time to read in spring," she said. "When he's not working on his job in Happy Valley, he's helping Mrs. Otter on the farm. It's this winter, when my garden is sleeping, that he'll enjoy the books I give him."

Still, I reflected, Mr. Otter seemed to find a good deal of time in which to help Katy with her gardening. But of course I shouldn't have felt flattered if a man had preferred a book to her company.

Certainly, most any woman would have enjoyed having Mr. Otter and William around her place. Even I couldn't help but admire their graceful, deliberate ways, their measured speech, the economy and fitness with which they moved. Katy remarked that they had the continental attitude towards women she'd rarely seen outside of Europe. A woman wasn't old to them simply because she was past thirty-five. Katy's two volunteer gardeners, father and son, were so tall, so broad of shoulder, lean of hip and long of leg, it used to make me sigh to think how they would look strolling on Park Avenue with Westchester haircuts and wearing clothes, perhaps, from Abercrombie & Fitch. When a man has a handsomely shaped skull, it is a pity if he lets his hair grow too long. Nature hadn't designed Mr. Otter to be a ditch-digger.

Katy said she thought at heart he was an intellectual. He once told her he would have liked to go back to school if it were possible. It made him feel badly to realize that William and Calvin had learned so many things about which he knew nothing. "Children should not know more than papa," he remarked, plaintively. "I should teach them. But they can teach me," he added.

The day Katy told Mr. Otter there was no room in her garden for more plants, he told her there was no room in his bookcase for more books. It contained a good collection, not only the classics we had resurrected from our attic, but stacks of modern novels, children's stories, history, adventure, nature, biography.

"I can see Mr. Otter sitting around the fire this winter, reading to the children," said Katy, warmly. She had studied to be a teacher, and the thought of providing people with good reading always made her happy.

"I'll even give them some of the books I get for Christmas this year," she added. "After I've read them myself, of course. It's really remarkable the way one's shelves can get all cluttered up. A little weeding out now and then is a good thing."

Winters in the country can be very dismal. Deep snowdrifts blocked the narrow dirt roads through Smoky Valley and often, for weeks at a time, it was impossible for the mailman to get through. "But anyway they'll have all those books to keep them company through the long winter," said Katy, comforting herself.

Katy and I visited her mother in Montreal that spring, but the middle of June found us on our way home.

We arrived with summer weather that had come flying and dancing through Smoky Valley on a hot, fragrant breeze which blew three or four days without stopping. It whipped the countryside into life, greened the grass under one's eyes and made buds swell and burst like clouds of popcorn. The roads dried up and bitter-sweet clouds of dust rolled over them. The streams were tumbling-clear. Wild cherries flowered in the meadows and the wintergreen growing thickly under the hemlocks had the rich sheen

of jade. Bluebirds and orioles ornamented the shrubs and trees along the roadsides, and in front of the farmhouses plumes of lilacs waved gaily in the breeze. The woods were rich and warm and pregnant with teeming life.

Katy was not disappointed in what had happened in her swamp and native gardens during our absence. She found a spread of blossoms that exceeded all her expectations. The swamp garden particularly was a fairyland. The blue flag was out, the grass starred with forget-me-nots and pink lady's-slippers twinkled on little hummocks.

Katy found half a dozen species of violets—Canada white, Selkirk's, marsh-blue, smooth yellow, woolly blue and bird's-foot—twinkling in the grass, growing out of soil placed in hollow logs, between flagstones and in rock crevices. Certainly, Mr. Otter had succeeded in imparting to Katy's garden the cool, moist flavor of the woodland. Ephemeral bloodroot and hepatica had gone, but we found yellow clintonia, meadowrue, bellwort and patches of May apple. Katy was beside herself with delight.

"And what's this?" she cried, getting down on her hands and knees alongside a specially prepared bed of moss and ferns that would have done credit to the International Flower Show.

Mr. Otter had combed the countryside, and he knew the secrets of the marly bogs and the sphagnum swamps. He brought in specimens of the jewels they produced. There was North America's most beautiful little orchid—the Calypso; Katy had never seen one before but she recognized this specimen for the rare wood nymph that it was. Furthermore, Mr. Otter had found a cluster of *Arethusa*, another small orchid, only slightly less lovely than the Calypso; and a few specimens of the dainty rose *Pogonia*. Katy said she believed her garden the only one in the state glorified by specimens of these three rarities. She asked me to photograph the flowers in color.

"I give Mr. Otter a few old books I don't want myself, and he brings me kingly gifts like these," she murmured, humbly.

Soon afterward Mr. Otter, wearing his best pair of pants, Cal-

vin's Sunday shirt and William's second-best necktie, came over to witness Katy's pleasure in the floral display, in which creation he modestly disclaimed a share of credit. Next day Katy called on the Otters, and, since it had become a habit, she took a book along for Mr. Otter. "He found more room in my garden for flowers, I will find room in his bookcase for another book," she said, taking her departure.

But she came home much too soon. There was something very wrong, I knew it even before she got in the house. Katy looked very funny—indeed, she looked as if she was about to break down. She put the book—which she'd brought home with her—down on the table with a sigh and a kind of renunciation in her manner.

"Well, what's the matter?" I said. "Has Mr. Otter decided to use the bookcase for a hen roost, after all?" I couldn't understand exactly why, but when speaking to Katy about the Otters I had fallen into the habit of concealing my affection for them in mild, and perhaps not very good jokes.

"No, the hens are in the henhouse," she said. Katy paused, and gave a sniff. "And the bookcase is in the parlor, full of books." Katy looked at me out of tragic eyes. "I never dreamed it, and I practically forced it out of him. I embarrassed him terribly; I'll never forgive myself. Even the little boys seemed ashamed—for him. They said, 'He won't read them, he'll just have them. You know he likes to hold them.' You see," Katy went on, "Mr. Otter never had a chance to go to school in the old country, and there was no one to teach him. He didn't learn over here, either. He can't read."

Katy was so upset about having forced Mr. Otter, whom she considered a distinctly intellectual type, to admit that he couldn't read, she cried her eyes out, got sick and went to bed for two days. But it was really Mr. Otter, the proper victim, who had been most humiliated.

He wasn't particularly ashamed of the fact that he couldn't read, but he bitterly regretted having put a lady in a position which caused her so much mortification, even if it had been at his own

expense. He was a sensitive man, keenly aware of Katy's discomfiture.

One day, when I met him on the road he explained that he felt he ought to return the books, since he had accepted them under false pretenses. Taking a book one wasn't able to read was just like accepting clothes one couldn't wear because they didn't fit—or food one had no intention of eating while others were starving.

"But the children can read them," I said.

"And I read them some day too," he told me, stoutly. "I am not always dumb-bell. Lena, she say she teach me how to read. Mary go to high school, very smart, but I feel bad to learn from my own daughter. But Lena give me lesson every day now and I soon know the A, B, C. Pretty soon everything will be fine, and I will read every book, even the one with the long word."

My heart warmed towards Lena. Obviously Mr. Otter had grown to like her. I did recall, however, something Molly had whispered to me the day before when I saw her at the bridge. "Mamma never talk to Lena, only make faces at her, and look mad all the time." As a rule, the small Otters seemed reluctant to discuss Lena, perhaps because she lacked their mother's approval. William's exact relationship to the girl I couldn't guess but I felt sure there was nothing outrageous in it, nothing to shame him or discredit his family. I told myself William was merely waiting for his mother to grow to like the girl he had brought home before he declared his intentions.

If I had been his age, confronted with a choice between a flying career and a beauty like Lena, I am very much afraid that I, too, would have chosen Lena.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Cornflakes and Cream of Wheat

*L*et's play store," piped Molly, after she got tired of flying around on the windy hilltop, pretending she was a kite.

"Who'll be storekeeper?" asked Dennis, flinging himself down on the grass.

"I will," said Davy.

"No, it's my turn," said Dennis. "Besides, I kin count better'n you. Alla way up ta twenny."

"What'll we sell?" asked Jennie, liking the idea.

"What'll you use for money?" said Mickey, scornfully. "It's been scarcer'n hen's teeth 'round here since William los' his job."

"Well, we kin use sand for sugar, and mud for butter, and stones for eggs, and sticks for bananas and beer bottle tops for money, but what'll we use for oatmeal?"

"Oatmeal, oatmeal, oatmeal," groaned Geoff, who was sitting on the chopping block with a gloomy expression. "Don't lemme hear the word if it ain't really necessary. It's oatmeal for breakfast, oatmeal for dinner, oatmeal for supper. And without sugar on it, too. Gee, if we could only have *cornflakes* for a change, or even Cream of Wheat, why, that would be good. It's a heck of a time ta play store when the buttery's empty, only makes me alla more hungry, don't it you, too, Mum?"

Mrs. Otter came down the rickety, moss-eaten verandah with her sewing. She smiled, but did not commit herself.

William being out of work, his contributions to the family treasury had ceased, and Mr. Otter's ditch-digging salary, which he received on Saturday, was usually gone by the middle of the week. The cupboards, as Geoff complained, were empty, and so was the cracked china cup that functioned as the family's treasury department. The Otters were all destined to wear lean and hungry looks until the following payday.

Today was only Thursday.

"An' wif an extry mouf ta feed, too," muttered Mickey, casting a glance of positive hatred at Lena, who sat on the grass reading a book. "And wifout any money comin' in from William, either," he went on, an aggrieved note in his voice, which somehow suggested that it was Lena's fault that William was no longer working, and that they were all hungry.

Ten-year-old Alix came up from behind, and gave Mickey a good poke in the ribs. Lena burst into tears, closed her book and walked down the hill. As she brushed by us, I caught the fine scent of daffodils. Today the girl wore a simple yellow frock and I could tell that even young Walt, who liked to look at Lena when he thought nobody else was watching, was conscious of how it glorified her figure, that seemed like a slender stalk, flowering so beautifully at the bosom.

"Now see what ya done, ya made Lena cry," said Alix, scowling. "D'ya think that was a nice thing ta do?"

"Oh, let her cry," said Mickey. "She'll come back. And if she don't like it here, why don't she go sommers else? It'll be one less mouf ta feed."

"Why, Lena doesn't eat any more than a bird; she just picks at her food," said Walt, who, like Alix, had become Lena's warm admirer and champion. "This morning she gave Molly her oatmeal and didn't have anything herself but a cup of coffee."

Mrs. Otter ignored the girl's emotional departure and made herself comfortable in the rocker, and Geoff, not caring at the moment whether Lena came back or not, went on with his lamentation.

"My stomach's all shrunk up like a ball of rubber, Mum," he said. "Feel of it, and see how hollow it is."

Mrs. Otter obligingly felt, and Geoff seemed more pleased than distressed when she pronounced it very hollow indeed. Nor did Mrs. Otter seem at all disturbed. As she had gone hungry so often, she had long ago learned to be philosophical, even fatalistic about food. Somehow, her family always managed to keep alive and

well, and if they went without a single good thing to eat one day, something extra good often turned up the next. Now she said: "It only tood o'clock," and in her voice was the insinuation that there was still plenty of time for a delicious meal to turn up.

"Besides," she went on, "it too hot to eat, anyway."

Indeed, it was a very warm June day, and although Mrs. Otter's arms and legs were bare, and she had on the threadbare calico dress, full of holes and tears, which she wore all season through and sometimes slept in, the heat still made her look like a huge lump of country butter, melting away in the sun.

"Gee, it's never too hot for *me* ta eat, Mum," said Geoff. He looked about him hungrily, seeing everything upon which his eyes rested in terms of food, and finding only bleak starvation in the landscape.

"Me think maybe we have good supper tonight," Mrs. Otter continued, comfortably. She got up to shake out three kittens marooned in the tall lilac bush, and then turned to survey her dwelling with a critical but not discontented eye. If the tumble-down shack had the appearance of imminent collapse, it carried a gay and reckless air just the same. It was like a man disintegrating happily, not giving a hang. Geraniums, petunias, fuchsias, and nasturtiums dripped luxuriously from old baked-bean cans standing in the windows (Mrs. Otter had what she called the growing hand); the ragged curtains flapped merrily; moss and weeds grew from wide cracks in the timber, and the hens roosted intimately on the roof, the verandah and the window sills. The house invited, rather than forbade the elements.

Mrs. Otter had spoken with such confidence that Geoff cheered up, and presently the other children, seeming to know by instinct that supper was being discussed, gathered around, pouring down from the roof, dropping out of trees, haylofts, and coming in from the creek that hugged the curve of Otter Hill. Mrs. Otter regarded her brood happily, and so did I. The Otters had casually accepted me in the role of benevolent spectator; they displayed no embarrassment whatever over the evidence of their abysmal poverty

which they must have realized I saw, and whenever I visited Otter Hill, their merry existence went on uninterruptedly.

"Mum says it ain't too late for us to have a good supper tonight," said Geoff, with more hope than scorn in his voice. "But I don't believe in fairy tales, just like I don't believe in Sanny Claus. There ain't nothin' left in the buttery but oatmeal and potatoes and Mum ain't got no more of Pa's pay left." The smallest Otter was always acutely aware of the family's current financial situation.

"And what burns me up," Geoff went on, in tones of disgust, "is that we got an old man 'round the place, sleepin' in our barn nights, sometimes sharin' our meals, who's got enough money to tear it up in pieces and throw it in the krick. Gee, that old man's sure crazy, all right," finished Geoff, bitterly.

"Me got flour, and sugar, and five eggs, too," said Mrs. Otter, calmly.

"But no bread," said Geoff. "We can't eat flour and sugar raw. And what good's five eggs 'gainst nineteen of us? Unless you're gonna bake a cake," he added, hopefully. But he really knew Mrs. Otter wouldn't waste flour and sugar and eggs like that.

"I don't believe in Sanny Claus, either," put in Mickey, contemptuously. "The hell with him. He never brings me anything, anyway. I'll earn my own money and buy my own Christmas presents with it, and won't ask lief of nobody."

"That right, by golly," said Mrs. Otter, giving her sweet smile to the little golden-haired boy, who, having made his declaration of independence, retired in a tide of bashfulness behind her rocker. Mrs. Otter herself had the greatest contempt for myths and legends.

Eight-year-old Rolf lay on his back in the sunshine—the only one of the family who hadn't complained of being hungry. I didn't think he was hungry, and so he probably felt ashamed. Perhaps he was uneasy, too, for Davy and Dennis were watching him suspiciously, evidently trying to guess the secret of his complacency. Only that morning Katy had found Rolf loitering under the trees

near Red Maples. She had filled up a bag with oranges (the orange was a fabulous fruit to the Otters, and Florida and California, where it grew, the Promised Land!) and given it to the boy. Ordinarily, Rolf would have shared the windfall with his brothers and sisters, but he was so hungry that, almost before he knew it, he was gobbling up the fruit, and scattering a golden trail of orange peels down the road and along the creek path. The twins Davy and Dennis, who had been playing on the rocks, soon picked up that golden trail and followed it to the wooden footbridge, where they found Rolf (who had just finished the last orange) sitting and dangling his feet in the water. Katy, meanwhile, had gone out walking, and she overheard the twins accuse Rolf of being an awful hog for not sharing the oranges. He had denied eating anything and the twins were puzzled and suspicious.

"Las' good thing I et was las' night, when that ol' tramp give us them bananas," said Rolf.

A tramp had stopped at Otter Hill the night before to beg a meal. Mrs. Otter gave him a dish of potatoes, which he ate politely, but with evident distaste. Then, glancing through the window into the kitchen where the family were at supper, he saw that they were faring no better than he. With a pitying gesture, he removed six bananas from a cavernous hole in the lining of his coat, and generously shared them with the family.

Raindrops began to fall now and there was a dash for the verandah, except for some of the smaller children who declared the rain would make them grow. Mrs. Otter watched them with placid enjoyment as they raced on the lawn and got soaking wet. "Rain wash their clothes, me don't have to use washtub," she explained.

Presently, when the shower grew thicker, and great warm, fluid drops came down vertically, Mr. Otter drove up the hill in the Model T truck, the rain having ended his day's work in Happy Valley.

He wore boots laced to the knees, his other blue workshirt, and a pair of burlap trousers. He looked warm and tired. He carried his lunch pail in one hand, and a big newspaper parcel in the other.

He smiled at the little Otters and bestowed a weary, middle-aged kiss upon Mrs. Otter, which she warmly returned. "Hello, Papa," she said. "How you do? Work hard today?"

"Plenty tired, by Jesus," said Mr. Otter. The excitement of his arrival made the little calliope in Molly's throat pipe wildly. She commandeered his lunch pail, snatched out a potato sandwich and dived through a hole in the lattice work under the verandah to feast without interruption or having to share. When Mr. Otter unwrapped the parcel he had brought, the small Otters, guessing it contained something to eat, gathered around. Mr. Otter, in the grandiose manner of a magician extracting a brace of rabbits from a hat, produced two plump white Leghorn hens from the newspaper wrappings, and triumphantly held them up by their fine yellow legs.

"Geoff, me tell you we have good supper tonight," cried Mrs. Otter, swooping upon the fowls like a hawk. But Geoff had disappeared down the hillside, carrying the brown jug.

"How you ketch, Papa?" cried Mrs. Otter, knowing full well Mr. Otter hadn't bought the hens.

"Oh, I run over with Model T," he replied, comfortably. "Run into big flock on road. Catch one by neck, with front wheel. Catch one by leg, with back wheel. I think nobody see. Stop and pick up." Mr. Otter looked slightly ashamed, but Mrs. Otter threw back her head and laughed loudly, and so did the children.

"Gee, Pa, you oughta go to work that way alla time," cried Mickey. "Then maybe we'd have chicken more oftng." Mickey's blue eyes were snapping hungrily, and already he was seeing the big iron kettle on the stove, full of rich, yellow gravy and the succulent hens floating in it.

"Weigh eight pounds, all together," said Mrs. Otter, balancing the hens one in each hand, and surveying them with enormous satisfaction. "By golly, Papa, me make good fricassee tonight."

The children, having praised Mr. Otter's accident in running down the hens as if it were a matchless feat in sharpshooting, commenced doing a dance of delight on the lawn, and in a little while

William, carrying a tin pail, came up the hill with Lena. William was stripped to the waist, and his shoes and blue overalls were soaking wet. The pail, which he offered Mrs. Otter, was full of wild strawberries.

"Oh, where you pick?" she asked, giving him the smile that seemed such an ample reward for anything her children did for her.

"Down in the field by the pond, Mum," replied William. "It took a long time to fill the pail, though. There aren't many this year. I don't know why." William spoke in slightly discouraged tones, for, being the oldest boy, he somehow felt as if he were letting the family down when they went hungry.

Lena, who enjoyed even a drenching if William got one too, shyly produced a paper bag and showed it to Mr. Otter. He looked in the bag and the girl received a rewarding smile, too. "Nice big ones," he said. "Lena pick," he added, handing the bag to Mrs. Otter, whose expression changed at once.

"Oh, me no want," she said, harshly for her. "Me know fambly in Pennsylvania, pick mushroom. They eat, go to bed, and when they wake up in morning, everybody dead. Alix, throw away," she commanded.

Alix grumbled and walked away with the bag and Lena's face got very red. She blinked the tears away, walked slowly towards the house and William, after a moment's hesitation, followed her.

"Mum, Lena ain't tryin' ta poison us with those mushrooms," said Rolf.

But Mrs. Otter's lips were moving now; she was planning the menu. Chicken fricassee, strawberry pie—that was a good start. She dropped the hens into a big pail and called for Walt to bring out the teakettle. She poured the scalding water over the hens, and then, as clouds of unsavory steam rolled off their plump bodies, she began to clean them, picking the pinfeathers with incredible rapidity.

While the children were watching, Geoff's voice curved up the hillside. "Hey, c'mon, somebody help me." Half a dozen small Otters, all of them looking excited, flew to Geoff's rescue, and a

minute later they were on the verandah, beaming, their arms full of parcels. Mrs. Otter grinned wickedly, guessing immediately—as I did—what had happened.

Geoff, remembering the group of fishermen who, early in the afternoon, had parked their cars near the red iron bridge, had thought they might like a little drink.

"They brought their own dinners, Mum, but they didn't wanna fish in the rain, and it was too early to eat. They didn't wanna lug it back to the city, either, so they give it ta me. I brought 'em a jug o' cider and you bet they waited long nuf to finish that off, though," he cried, in breathless excitement.

Mrs. Otter often sent hunters and fishermen big jugfuls of Mr. Otter's hard but extremely palatable cider, a single glassful of which made a man not used to it quite dizzy. She usually sent it by Geoff or Mickey, her most entertaining boys, and the rewards had been rich. Baskets of food, quarters, nickels, dimes, and sometimes a big fat bass from Aspen Pond if they were biting well. Whenever a fisherman caught a carp, Geoff would tell him how his mother usta fix it in the old country.

"And here's four bottles o' beer for Pa ta wash down his chicken with," cried Geoff, coming to the last parcel.

With trembling hands, Mrs. Otter put the good things in the cupboard, out of the reach of snitching hands and the hordes of flies that came in through the windows. "We got so much food, it's too bad we ain't got company," said Geoff, looking at me. "Won't you stay for supper, Mr. Curley?"

Mrs. Otter added her own invitation to Geoff's, but I reluctantly declined.

"Well, if Mr. Curley won't stay, here comes some company anyway," said Walt. "And he's bringing something, too. I wonder what."

Old Corry, whom the Otters hadn't seen for several days, came puffing up the hillside with some parcels under his arm.

"Corry, what's that ya got there, somethin' ta eat?" asked Mickey, with frank curiosity.

"How come ya been out in the rain, Corry, and didn't git wet?" asked Alix.

"Because I am one of God's children, which means a child of nature," he said. "I accept rain, cold and heat with equal tranquillity. It is only when we fight against the elements that we feel their sting. One must never contend against them. I once slept peacefully in a snowbank for two days and nights, and woke up greatly refreshed."

"The old humbug," muttered Lena. The girl had dried her tears and returned to the verandah. I fancied she was jealous of Corry and his solid position with the Otter family. "He must have had a bottle of something to keep him warm in the snowbank. Papa used to see beetles crawl around on the walls when he got the D.T.'s, but this one's got one in brain. Something special."

Corry put down four loaves of bread on the chair next to Mrs. Otter. "Manna has fallen in the desert," he said, in oracular tones. "The baker's boy's truck skidded in the soft mud caused by the rain, and ran into a ditch. Some of his wares were upset, and I found these fresh loaves of bread in the grass after he drove away."

"Ha, ha, ha!" laughed Geoff. "Only a little whilst ago he wouldn't leave us no bread because we didn't have no money. After we been tradin' with him for years, too." Geoff examined the loaves. "Holy smokes, Mum," he cried. "What d'ya think? *Raisin bread!* Gee, that's almost as good as cake!"

"There ain't nothin' better'n a slice o' raisin bread an' a glass o' fresh milk," declared Alix.

"Now, you gimme a good hot cup o' coffee with plenty o' sugar in it every time, and I won't ax ya for no more," said Mickey.

Otter Hill buzzed with excitement. The reception accorded Corry's loaves filled him with joy, and he was moved to give a concert. He produced a pocket comb, wrapped a piece of tissue paper around it, and commenced playing "The Battle Hymn of the Republic." The children called Corry's singular instrument the Buzzola. When he blew upon it, Corry produced a sound not unlike that made by a horde of flies buzzing against a kitchen

window on a hot summer's day. Mrs. Otter asked Geoff what kind of potatoes went best with fricassee and he said mashed. "With nice chicken gravy poured over 'em, potatoes don't taste so much like potatoes," he said. (The Otters often lived on potatoes—as they did on oatmeal, or macaroni—for weeks at a time.) Mrs. Otter ordered the twins, Davy and Dennis, to fetch a basketful from the cellar and her paring knife from the kitchen. She seemed as excited as the children over the impending feast.

I thought it time for me to speak up, and announce my contribution to the party, before Mrs. Otter went further with her preparations for it.

"When I was in the village I stopped at the drugstore and asked Mr. Wagnalls to drop a couple of quarts of fresh strawberry ice cream here on his way home," I said. "It'll be all packed. I guess he's on his way up the hill now; a car just stopped down below."

But it wasn't the proprietor of the village drugstore, a summer resident of Smoky Valley—it was Calvin Otter who, a few minutes later, came pushing his obviously weary feet up the hill!

The Otters stared as if he were a ghost; then starry-eyed glances were exchanged among them. "It's Calvin—Calvin's coming home!"

A flock of children flew to greet him. Mrs. Otter's face glowed like the face of a figure on a church window, when the sun strikes it.

She didn't look down the hillside, but her eyes met Mr. Otter's and they exchanged vastly contented smiles. Mr. Otter began to help her move the picnic table on the lawn, and to place boxes and egg crates around it for chairs, and newspapers on it for a cloth.

Corry's music grew vehement. He watched me solemnly over the comb he was playing upon while William and Lena came out on the lawn. William held the girl's hand and the sight of them made my heart beat warmer, they were so young and so anxious.

Calvin, whose approach had been impeded by a flock of young Otters clinging to his arms and legs, came across the lawn. Everything about him was downcast; Adam himself on his expulsion from Paradise couldn't have made a more eloquent figure of

shame. Mrs. Otter regarded him now, with a full smile of welcome. Calvin broke away from the youngsters and flew into her arms.

The Otters were an emotional family, but with this difference: they stood firm against their tribulations, but their joys they submitted to. Again I told myself I had no business being here, a stranger, gazing upon this intimate homecoming. Mrs. Otter smoothed Calvin's hair as if he had been a baby.

Some of the babies were crying now, as they always did when a grown-up cried. Even Geoff's eyes were a little red, although he tried to look scornful. I only hoped that now that Calvin had come home, William and Lena would be forgiven. Mrs. Otter pushed Calvin's head back and looked full into his red, flushed face. She laughed waggishly and cheered him at once. She forced him to turn around, and watch the children turning cartwheels on the lawn to amuse him. When William brought Lena up to Calvin, the girl seemed frightened out of her wits. She couldn't talk.

As for Calvin, he acted as though her astonishing looks had stunned him. He sat down on the chopping block, as if in a state of collapse, and looked about dumbly, giving his head foggy little shakes. Mrs. Otter poured him a drink of water and he took it thirstily. "Best water in the county, Mum," he muttered. After he had hidden his face behind the big dipper for a moment, he regained his composure. He did not look at Lena again.

Certainly, I thought, Katy had been right when she said the Otters were too good-looking for poor country people. Calvin was a fine-looking boy, with his dark eyes, glistening black hair, wet with rain, his tall, slim figure. His shirt was in tatters, and one could see the brown, smooth skin underneath. His trousers hung on his long legs like stove pipes and some of his toes stuck out of the canvas shoes he wore. He looked famished, and judging from the wisps of dry grass and hay sticking on his clothes and hair, he must have been sleeping—and starving—in empty lots and hay-lofts. It was a fine thing when a boy came home like that, and Mrs. Otter felt doubly joyful because they could celebrate his homecoming with what amounted to a Lucullan banquet.

"Gee, you're dirty," said Geoff, critically, looking his tall brother over from head to foot.

"Guess I am," mumbled Calvin. "Guess I'll go down to the creek and take a bath."

"Good idea," said Geoff.

"Jennie, get soap, towel, clean underwear for Calvin," said Mrs. Otter, solicitously, as she resumed arranging the table under the thorn-apple tree. It was an errand fastidious little Jennie gladly performed. Presently Calvin trooped down the hillside to the creek, followed by a bunch of small admiring Otters, all of whom seemed anxious to share his bath.

"Is Calvin as handsome as William?" asked Katy, when I got home and told her all about it.

"Yes, indeed, Mrs. Curley, and when he saw Lena, he nearly swooned. Evidently, he's just as susceptible, too."

Katy and I went outside to look at our flowers but the scene at Otter Hill kept recurring to me. The fricassee would be simmering on the stove now, and the potatoes boiling. The sun broke through the clouds and there was a rainbow. A flock of ducks winged their way into the sunset over Otter Hill, and a curl of white smoke from the chimney of the shack floated in the fading blue air.

Next morning I met Molly on the road near the bridge, and she recounted to me some of the good things they had had to eat—chicken fricassee, sliced ham and hard-boiled eggs, potato salad and mashed potatoes, salad, raisin bread—strawberry pudding and strawberry ice cream. "And I hadda good drinka beer, too, outen Pa's glass," piped Molly.

"You shoulda seen how much Calvin et," she went on. "Twiced as much as anybody else."

"But they's somethin' kinda funny in the air jist the same," Alix told me, that same day. "Calvin won't have no more ta do with Lena than Mum. I don't think he likes her, either. Well, some people jist ain't got very good taste."

I decided that Calvin had been puzzled and silenced by Lena's exotic appearance and her presence at Otter Hill, where she seemed

like a lily growing out of an ash heap. Even the hard-boiled fishermen from the city commented on the girl's astonishing looks. "Jesus, Sam, look at that," one of them whispered, in accents of awe, to his companion as Lena passed them by on the bridge, holding her red head disdainfully.

CHAPTER NINE

A Little Belle Waiting for a Ring

*E*arly summer scented and ornamented Smoky Valley. Chokecherries crimsoned the hedges, water lilies starred the sedge along the low shores of Aspen Pond, and orioles and bluebirds enlivened the roadside trees. Thickets of mint in the hot sun perfumed the creek banks, and the meadows were solid sheets of daisy-white and buttercup-gold.

Davy and Dennis, Jennie and Molly and Tessie romped in the fields by the hour. From the roadside I could see their heads bound up and down as they leaped through the tall thick-growing weeds. They plaited wreaths of daisies and buttercups and lay down in the sweet-smelling grass, with flowers strewn over them, pretending they were laid out in coffins. They rose from the dead to chase butterflies and locusts and baby robins fluttering weak-winged in the hedges. The winds, playing almost constantly across the flat-topped hills over the valley, gave motion to the sky and landscape of which the children seemed to become part. The sun polished their cheeks, tinted their eyes dazzling blue, burnt their yellow hair different shades of red and gold. Mrs. Otter let them fly about to their hearts' content, not caring if they showed up for lunch or not. "Only young onct," she explained. "Play, be happy. Grow up, stop play, work hard."

Sometimes the children followed me on my favorite path along Otter Creek. Sheets of wild grapes hanging from small trees formed

leafy canopies and the big elms towered over the thickets. In spring, the cool damp banks were tinted with the delicate color of wildflowers, and after June came, the surrounding fields were warm with the smell of summer, and the droning, humming sounds I thought were the contented voices of the hot, full months. If I decided to have a nap on the warm rocks, the little boys and girls would go away, or play quietly by themselves. One afternoon when I woke up with my hat over my face (one of the children had thoughtfully put it there, to keep away mosquitoes) I heard, mingled with careening songs of blackbirds and babbling voices of the creek, the sound of weeping. I got up and peered through the bushes.

It was Lena. She had come to have a good cry in private. I couldn't very well get away without revealing my presence to her, and I knew she would feel much better if she had her cry all out. I hung back and waited, until she had wrung out the very last tear. Lena rinsed her handkerchief in the stream, squeezed it dry, dashed cold water on her face and wiped it off. She got out her lipstick and reddened her mouth. She seemed satisfied when she surveyed herself in the mirror the clear water made.

Sitting on the creek bank, Lena had all the vivid beauty of the wild roses growing in such rank profusion over the stream. When I looked at her, I almost forgot that I was a married man and supposed to be a sick one. Certainly, Lena was the kind of girl who could make men approaching middle age feel like boys in their twenties. I waited a little while longer, then crashed through the bushes. "That rock's covered with poison ivy, Lena," I said. "You won't be so pretty if you catch that stuff."

Lena flung me a blue defiant look. "I've often been tempted to dash a bottle of vitriolic acid over my face. Then perhaps I wouldn't get myself and other people in so much trouble. As for poison ivy, I don't catch it. Besides," she added, a little spitefully, "I think William would like me even if I wasn't pretty." With that Lena picked up a stone, took aim, and flung it across the creek at a lone tree. She was a good shot.

I wasn't prepared for a blast like that. "I'm not susceptible to poison ivy, either," I said.

But if I wasn't afraid of poison ivy, I was a little afraid of Lena. To describe her at all accurately, one had to use the trite phrases. A flaming red head, every hair on it intensely alive and glowing; a crystalline white skin, the texture of white lilacs, with a tiny crop of freckles on the nose; eyebrows a vivid thread of black silk over deep, startled violet eyes; a quite passionate mouth that seemed a promise of kisses and was the color of wild strawberries; a figure that curved, dipped deliriously, and then curved again. The natural hollows and curves of Lena's figure—they seemed to invite the questing male hand. There may have been a touch of something unwholesome in all this authentic beauty, a faint suggestion of the wanton in Lena's eyes—or was it only Katy's impression of her, relayed to me, that had formed a prejudice in my mind? But Lena would be irresistible to any young fellow. He might not know what to do with her after having had her for a while, but certainly he'd take her—as one picks an exquisite, useless blossom and is regretful when it has wilted in the hand.

"I'd like to speak to you," said Lena, in a low voice. She picked up another stone, a small smooth one, and nervously clapped it from one hand to the other.

"Are wedding bells going to ring for you and William?" I asked lightly, sitting on the rock a few feet away from Lena.

"If she'll let them."

"Who, Mrs. Otter?"

"Yes," gulped Lena. "But no matter how much he cared for a girl, William wouldn't marry her unless his mother liked her too. He's not so much like an American boy." Here there was a note of pride, rather than reproach, in Lena's voice. "You see, I've lived in Canada, and I know a lot of French boys. William's more like them. It's all family with him. He thinks the world of his home, of his mother and father, sisters and brothers. I would too, if only Mrs. Otter would let me. But she doesn't even speak to me. She thinks I'm no good."

Lena's voice had grown as plaintive as the warble of a song sparrow sitting in the mountain ash sapling near by, and watching us intently.

I didn't know what to say. It had been a great shock to Mrs. Otter, of course, when William, having been commissioned to find Calvin, had brought home a girl like Lena instead. Not even a nice girl could take Calvin's place, and here William had come along with one Katy thought looked fast and who Mrs. Otter thought was "no good." To poor Mrs. Otter, that must have been like adding insult to injury.

Lena probably read my thoughts, for she gave out a quivering little laugh. Picking a daisy that was nodding over the stream, she brushed it against her lips, and then started biting down the stem. "Do you know," she said, in her well-spoken way, "that even some of the little boys think I'm bad. The other day Mickey—oh, he's a cute one, and I'm crazy about him—asked me if all bad girls had red hair."

"I used to think that myself when I was a little boy," I said. "Then, when I grew up, I married a redhead."

"Yes, you're grown up now—not a little boy like Mickey—and you, too, think I'm not good enough for William, don't you?" said Lena, quite desperately. "Don't be afraid to say exactly what you feel. It's your opinion that I shouldn't have come, isn't it—and that perhaps I ought to go away."

"Well, Lena," I began, lamely enough, "it's only fair to tell you that I can't understand why a girl as lovely as you, as well dressed, as well spoken, who's obviously had some kind of background suggestive of luxury, culture, should come to Otter Hill—should want to stay—could be satisfied to share the future of a simple country boy who has nothing at all of the world's goods to offer and who, as you yourself admit, is chained down by his family."

But that wasn't what I really thought. I had about decided that it was because Lena's former life had been so poor in many things in which Otter Hill could be held rich, that she was able to endure the low standard of physical existence on the windy hilltop. Fond

of the Otters as I was, and picturesque as I found their domain to be—I myself could never have started existence as an adult in a house where eighteen people did most of their living in the kitchen.

Lena sat watching me with a bitter smile. "You don't think the police are after me, and that Otter Hill's my hiding place?"

"I think a girl like you could honestly get almost anything she wanted out of life. Anything, anything! Beauty's a happy gift, you know."

"That's what *you* think," Lena retorted. "I've found it a terrible cross. William brought me here so his mother could grow to like me. If I was homely, and skinny, and sickly, she *would* like me. Couldn't a homely, skinny, sickly girl be bad, too? And you wonder what it is I want at Otter Hill, and why I should like to stay there. Well, I enjoy Otter Hill perhaps for the same reasons you do. And you spend about one-third of your time there."

Certainly, Lena was as intelligent as she was beautiful. "You think I mind the food and the appearance of the house? Well, I'm a very small eater, and I can always go to the village when I'm good and hungry. When the kitchen becomes oppressive, I can always go outside. As for my bed in the hayloft, it's so fragrant, I wake up sometimes smelling hyacinths. I love the farm and this valley."

That was enough for me. But Lena went on. "Besides, I really haven't a home to go to, not a nice one, anyway. My mother's up in Montreal at present, looking after herself, and she doesn't care much about having me around. Right now, I might be something of a rival to her. I don't want to be with her, either. And as for William, he isn't a simple country boy. If he's simple, he's intelligently simple, and that's fine. He's learned from people, and from books, and from nature all that any fellow should know. I've known college boys who were babies compared to William. But I'll tell you why I really fell for him—he was practically the first man I ever met who treated me decently right from the start. I couldn't get over it, and I would live in a pig pen with him," finished Lena, vehemently.

For a mere girl like Lena to have been so shaken because a male

did not instantly attempt intimacy with her brought home to me the kind of life she must have been part of. Lena flung away the remains of the daisy, and picked another one.

"I met William up in Watertown where he was looking for Calvin," she said. "He didn't have a car, and I drove him around in one I borrowed—from another man." Lena gave me another one of her defiant looks. "Sometimes he took a little time off from his search, and we'd go to a movie. They were pictures I'd already seen, but with William at my side, I could see them over a dozen times. After I'd known him four or five days, William asked me if he could kiss me good night."

Lena smiled softly, and forgot, for a few moments, that I was alive. "The other boys took kisses for granted," she continued, "right from the beginning. But William treated me as if he thought I was just as nice as his sister Mary." Lena's mouth trembled the least bit when she said this. "Getting to know William was the sweetest thing that ever happened to me. I'd hated almost everything about men. But mother had brought me up to believe that popularity with men was very desirable, and worth almost anything they asked for it. I didn't know any better. William liked me just for myself. He was content to hold my hand."

Lena seemed to be talking to herself. Perhaps it was because I so rarely gave confidences, that I received so many. "I won't say I've been an angel," Lena went on. "But now that I know the Otters, I realize how hateful the kind of life my mother leads really is and I don't want it for me. But what can I do if Mrs. Otter sends me away? It's William I want to be good for."

"Why don't you go away together?" I said—to my instant regret, because it seemed like disloyalty to Mrs. Otter.

Lena spoke with the air of one who had given the matter serious thought. "If I got William to go away with me, he'd leave so much of himself behind at Otter Hill. He's very sentimental about the place and about his family. I could get him to do it, I think, but he'd really hate to marry a girl his mother didn't like. No, I don't want it to be like that."

I looked at Lena appreciatively, thinking that she was being

wonderfully generous. Almost any other girl would have been delighted to separate the man she loved from a mother who disapproved of her. Lena moved closer to my side and put her hand on my arm. "What can I do to make her like me? Perhaps if you'd speak to her some time—"

I hadn't ever pitied anybody more in my life, but I knew I couldn't possibly convert Mrs. Otter's old world, feudal mind. She would listen to me quietly, her rejoinders would be polite ones, she might be astonished—but she wouldn't change. There was nothing for Lena to do but stay on and do her best to win Mrs. Otter's respect.

"There are the children, Lena," I suggested. "If you won their affection, you might eventually win hers, too. I think you've made a very good start with them already."

"Or I might win her jealousy," said Lena. "Some of the bigger boys like me, but the others seem to be afraid to be friendly. Yesterday, I bought a box of candy in the village and Mrs. Otter wouldn't let me pass it around. When the baker's boy stopped I wanted to buy them some cakes and pies—their mouths were fairly watering—but Mrs. Otter said no, a lot of sweet stuff was bad for the stomach."

Lena stripped the daisy of its petals and scattered them in the water. "Besides, she probably thinks my money isn't clean. Well, it isn't. My father—"

Lena went on and told me something about her life. Her father had been a bootlegger, operating boats (some of them disguised as pleasure and excursion craft) on the St. Lawrence River, plying between Canada and the States, and occasionally taking a cargo down along the New England coast.

Lena, as a little girl, had often accompanied him on his trips: the presence of a child was always disarming. Her father's river career had been an exciting one and Lena, at a tender age, had had great experience of men and affairs—on boats, in hotels, courtrooms, jails, barrooms, trains, restaurants and roadhouses. Her mother, not a domestic woman at all, liked to dine out, and Lena

remembered closing her heavy eyes and falling asleep long past bedtime with her head on many a glass-topped restaurant table. Drunkards, crooked politicians, card sharps, gangsters, gamblers—Lena had known them ever since she could remember. Her mother was promiscuous, and her father, while taking pleasure trips up and down the river, was often accompanied by merry ladies who took their whiskey neat, and whom Lena had been instructed to call "Aunt Ruby" or "Aunt Lillian."

If they happened to be on the boat together, Lena's mother and father quarreled almost continuously, the mildest of their threats being to pitch each other overboard. Lena's father was finally killed by revenue officers and her mother took up an itinerant sort of existence, dividing her time between Quebec, Montreal, Alexandria Bay and occasionally descending upon Boston and New York. "Now and then Mamma and I would go to a movie," Lena said, "and right from the first, I enjoyed pictures showing nice family life, children's parties, everybody around the Christmas tree or the Thanksgiving turkey and that sort of thing. I wanted nice things too, and when I saw William up in Watertown he seemed just the sort of man who epitomized them for me. Believe me, I went after him in a big way," admitted Lena, quite unashamedly.

I had to laugh at that, but Lena was quite serious. "Papa put some money in a trust fund for me, and every month I get fifty dollars out of it. I could find a job and with what I earn and the little I get each month from the trust fund, William could go to aviation school. And I'd be as fit a wife as anybody."

"Of course you would, Lena," I said, warmly.

"William's so lovely and so pleasant," said Lena, sitting back against the rock and relaxing a little. "Like some of the lines in the Songs of Solomon. How do they go?"

"Yes, he is altogether lovely. His head is as the most fine gold, his locks are bushy, and black as a raven—"

"That's right," said Lena, eagerly. "Say some more, please."

"His legs are as pillars of marble, set upon sockets of fine

gold: his countenance is as Lebanon, excellent as the cedar.' But Lena," I said, "there are some lines in the Songs one might apply to you. 'Thy speech is comely—'"

Lena interrupted. "Oh, no, I'm not like that. And I'd rather talk about William. He's not a boy, he's really such a man. The boys I went to high school with, boys his own age, seemed like children compared to him. Perhaps it's because he'd done a man's work since he was twelve. I'd give anything to have known William as a young boy."

"I think William probably was a great deal like Walter is now."

"You're probably right," said Lena. "Walter's so quiet and serious and bookish."

I hadn't helped Lena in any way but I think our talk had done her good. She lifted her slim legs out of the water, partly dried them with her hands, and let the sun do the rest. Then she drew on her stockings, not a bit self-conscious under my gaze. Lena was so refreshingly natural, I began to think she hadn't ever been arch or provocative for anybody. The more I saw of her, the more I liked and respected her. If she looked like a bird of paradise, certainly she had the soul of a woodthrush.

"Papa drove a big car, and he had a lovely boat," resumed Lena. "He took us to the best hotels and we always ate in expensive restaurants. I got my clothes from the best stores. Now I'm living in a shack, with people around me who wear rags and eat crusts and I'm enjoying it even if I'm not welcome. Well, I'm still hopeful. And now," Lena went on, "I'm going to pick a big bunch of daisies and buttercups for the verandah."

"And thank you very much," she added, with a gracious smile. Then she tripped away, without waiting for me to offer to accompany her. I was disappointed, but somehow I admired her all the more for it.

Certainly, Lena was an unusual girl, to be attracted by a family like the Otters. Most young people, I think, would have seen only the bare, unkempt farmhouse, the poverty, the near degradation—

and have missed entirely the charm, the love, the spirit of the struggle, and the family solidarity.

I walked away in the opposite direction until I came to the foot-bridge Geoff and his brothers had built over the creek. Crossing that, I took the corduroy road through the tamarack swamp. Geoff had shown me a hollow tree in which there was a nest of wood ducks; consequently, the tamarack swamp was a sort of consecrated place to me. The place was gay with jewel-like flowers growing on tall weeds, and alive with the songs of red-winged blackbirds fluttering on the swaying cattails. A steaming pond, with a lush, almost tropical growth, showed the white of lilies and arrowhead, the purple of pickerelweed—the blue of Asiatic dayflower growing luxuriantly along the low shores. As I walked home, my head was a pleasant jumble of Lena, Mrs. Otter, wood ducks, the Songs of Solomon—all comfortably stewing in the conviction that everything would come out all right.

CHAPTER TEN

Village Tale

One day young Walter Otter confessed to me that if he could spend an entire day in the city, he would be satisfied with country life forever after. I promised him a visit as soon as the weather got cooler, and meanwhile not only Walter, but his small brothers and sisters, were delighted with an occasional day in the near-by village to break up the monotony of farm life.

I stopped at Otter Hill on a bright July morning to fill up my car with as many small Otters as it would hold. I had business in the village and thought it would be fun to have company. But Geoff at once declared that he would not go.

“You can’t put a day in the village without spendin’ money and

that place is got its last dime outta me," he said. "If it meant starvation death, I wouldn't buy a loaf o' bread in the village."

Mrs. Otter was hanging bed sheets on the line strung from the lilac bush to the thorn-apple tree, and the children were sitting in clusters on the grass in the sun. "I can't go either, Mr. Curley," said Alix, looking out of the kitchen window with a mournful expression. "I can't find my pants. I put 'em on the bench las' night, and this morning they were gone. They musta flown away."

Overnight the small Otters' shirts, pants and stockings had a way of getting all mixed up in a tangle, or vanishing entirely.

Mickey had been having a heated argument with Rolf about the merits and de-merits of owning an airplane. "Mr. Curley," he said, "I'm tryin' ta tell Rolf here I wouldn't want no airplane ta go to work in. You couldn't stop at the saloon for a glass o' beer on the way home."

Mrs. Otter was grumbling to herself as she hung up a batch of blouses and shirts, ranging from size three to size sixteen; it seemed the sheets on Molly's bed had to be changed every day of late. "Wet bed Tuesday night, wet bed Wednesday night, wet bed Thursday night, wet bed Friday night. Molly reg'lar wet hen," grumbled Mrs. Otter.

"Let's help Alix find his pants," said Walt. "Then we can all go to the village. I'd like to stop at the li-bra-ry and find a book called the Od-ys-sey," he enunciated. "The principal of the high school said a man who hasn't read the Od-ys-sey is like a man who hasn't seen the ocean."

"Where's Molly?" I asked.

"Oh, she's up in bed, looking for her snake," was Mickey's fantastic reply.

But it turned out that Geoff had told little Molly that a strand of hair plucked from a horse's tail and placed in a bottle would turn into a snake overnight. Puzzled and delighted, Molly had lost no time in procuring a bottle and rounding up a horse; and Geoff's instructions as to the disposition of the hair were carefully observed. Molly was not disappointed. The following morning, in place of the hair from the horse's tail, she found a lovely little green

snake, hardly bigger than a worm, in the bottle. Molly carried it around in a small box full of grass and when she saw it last it had escaped and was crawling under a blanket on her bed.

While the children helped Alix find his pants, and Geoff lay flat on his back in the grass looking sulky, Mrs. Otter sat down for a few minutes to catch her breath and enjoy her visitor.

She told me she thought I was looking better, and I guessed that she was privately wondering when I was going back to work. About all I did was hang around, water the flowers, take naps under trees, and play with children. That wasn't a man's work.

I often guessed, or thought I did, what was going on inside Mrs. Otter's busy head—behind those candid blue eyes of hers while we visited together.

Certainly, after such a long rest my health ought to be restored and I should be functioning again as a normal male. Moreover, it would be a shame if these idle weeks Katy and I were spending in the country weren't productive, one way or another. We hadn't planted much in the garden, we fooled around with wildflowers mostly—but we were lately reunited after a long separation, so if we were trying hard to get a baby the time wouldn't be entirely wasted. It was high time we had a family, anyway. Mrs. Otter was very firm about that.

Sometimes, indeed, when I looked at Mrs. Otter's big, happy flock, I felt ashamed for my own lack of contribution—apologetic to my country, my Creator, even to the Otters. And when I picked up and fondled one of Mrs. Otter's babies, it was obvious from the way she looked that she was wondering why, after thirteen years of marriage, Katy and I were without children. Whose fault was it? Was it mine or was it Katy's—or had we purposely remained childless? Mrs. Otter couldn't tell, she was too sensitive to ask, but still, she was simply dying to know.

But we were still a couple fairly young and even now it wasn't too late. I had lived in China many years, away from my wife (a most unnatural circumstance), but now that we were together, my health restored, it was to be hoped that by next spring I would have a child of my own to play with. Mrs. Otter told me she hadn't

known a man, next to her husband Florian, who was so fond of children as I seemed to be.

Alix's pants were found under the mattress of his bed, but as for Molly's snake, it seemed to have escaped for good. The children were ready to leave with me and Walter urged Geoff to reconsider and come along to the village.

"Nope," said Geoff, resolutely. "I wouldn't be found dead in that place. Curley can spend his money like a drunken sailor there but that place has got its last dime outta me."

"Then let's take a look at old Corry before we go," said Walter. Turning to me, he added: "Corry just had one of his spells. Now he's lying in the barn in the hayloft with his eyes closed."

"Corry O.K." said Mrs. Otter. "Me give him glassa cider, get a little drunk, feel good, poor old man."

"Something Mrs. Merino said to old Corry made the beetle start crawlin' 'round in his brain," said Geoff.

"What did she say?"

"She found out he was sleepin' in our barn. She's afraid he might burn it down and so she says we can't have him here. Ya know, we bought this place offen her, but she still sorta owns it till it's all paid for. An' she tol' old Corry he'd be better off if somebody was lookin' after him. Now he thinks he's going to be sent back to the crazy house."

"I'll stop and see Father Justin," I promised, for the children all looked troubled. "He'll take the responsibility, I'm sure, and I know he can persuade Mrs. Merino that Corry is harmless and doesn't need to be sent away." The small Otters brightened as they followed me down the hill.

I asked Walter to explain what it was that Geoff had against the village. (One day I'd heard him say that everything there cost twice as much as it was worth and wasn't half as good.) It seemed that last winter, after the heavy snows, Geoff had been retained to shovel out the driveway leading to the Town Hall, as well as the parking space behind it. He had shoveled all day long, working himself into a fine sweat—and then hadn't been able to collect his

wages. He had presented his claims in person, over the telephone, by authorized representative, by letter and by invoice, only to be informed by the town fathers that there was no money in the treasury to pay for snow shoveling. Certainly, the village deserved the contempt Geoff felt for it. And when he got a little bigger, he said, he was going to one of the village stores, run up a bill for the amount he should have received for shoveling the snow, and never pay it! Mrs. Otter, Walter informed me, fully approved of Geoff's plan for getting even and thought he showed great resource.

But the other small Otters did not share Geoff's aversion for the village. They considered it great fun to catch a ride in and spend the day there even if it meant going without lunch. The first place the children asked me to stop at was the bakery. They got out of the car and looked longingly at the entrancing display of pastry in the window, variously topped, crowned and adorned with whipped cream, meringue, candy jewels and walnuts and pecans. "Cripes, it looks better'n a Christmas tree," said Mickey, fairly drooling.

I watched and listened from the car for a while, then decided to satisfy their longings. At that moment, however, the children all trooped into the shop and came out a few minutes later, each carrying a pastry of some kind. They seemed uncertain about having a feast on the sidewalk, and I signaled for them to get into the car, where they made short work of their purchases. "Gee, that was good lemon pie," said Alix, licking his lips. "I like store pie better'n ho-made."

"Lena give us the money," said Rolf, wiping some crumbs off his mouth.

"Now don't you tell Ma, will you, Jennie?" said Mickey, eating down his jelly roll.

"What do you think I am, a squeal-cat?" asked Jennie. "Besides, look at my chocolate cupcakes. I'm saving one of them to eat on the way home."

"Well, where shall we go first?" I said.

"To the duck pond!" cried Alix, his face glowing.

"To the library!" cried Walter.

"Here we go," I said. "It'll be the duck pond first, because that's nearest."

The business section of the village consisted of five blocks of Main Street, with stores on both sides and maple trees shading the cement walks. The most impressive structures were the Post Office, the Town Hall, King's General Store and Flag's Department Store, the Bank and the Catholic Church. Just beyond the village limits lay the pottery, the shoe factory, the piano factory, the foundry, machine shops and feed mills. The best residential district was a private park in which some two dozen families, withdrawn from the village proper almost completely, lived in considerable style and aloofness. These families, who controlled the village industries, entertained among themselves, sent their children to private schools and attended the theater and symphonies in near-by cities. That part of the village did not seem to want to know how the other part lived.

There was probably no more hate, pride, envy, greed, ambition, lust, hiding behind the inscrutable façades of its plain and pretentious dwellings than behind those of any other village its size; and the homely virtues, no doubt, were all represented. The village's greatest busybodies and scandalmongers weren't the bustling housewives, but the old men who hung around the barber shop gossiping. They wore old shirts without collars, their spotted pants were hitched up by suspenders, they never seemed to shave, they spit and chewed tobacco and stared at strangers with almost malevolent gaze. Ever since that time one of them had told William he'd heard Mrs. Otter had a baby whenever Mr. Otter put his shoes under her bed, Geoff had hated them, along with the rest of the village. These old men would have been so much better off at home, cultivating a vegetable garden or minding their grandchildren.

At the north end of Main Street was the public park with its big duck pond. The birds were fed regularly and there were facilities for shelter. Great flocks of wild fowl came and many of the

feathered visitors remained over winter. Alix Otter's eyes went big, and his face grew tense with excitement and rapture as he looked at the wild birds on the pond. Occasionally, a few dropped out of the sky on Otter Creek, but they were shy, and flew away before Alix could get a good look at them. But here were hundreds of birds, mallards and black ducks mostly, swimming in the pond, flying over it, waddling and feeding along the shore—mother birds leading their young about, drakes chasing females—almost within reach of the hand. Alix thought about the wild ducks all day long and he dreamed about them too. Sometimes when he woke up nights he would push Geoff and begin talking about them.

"Geoff, you know all them ducks—" he would begin, and talk away, almost feverishly, until Geoff fell asleep. "Geoff, all them ducks we saw today, do you suppose they'll get killed when the hunting season opens? I hope a lot of them escape." Alix would lie awake, thinking and worrying about the ducks. Miss Sullivan, the school teacher, found pictures of wild birds in his textbooks and tablets which he drew when he should have been studying.

At the pond Alix worked himself into a frenzy over the stately sight made by a flock of Canada geese—about a dozen birds—which landed on the water and came gliding towards the shore. Nothing could drag him away now. I gave him a bag of popcorn to feed the geese and ducks, and promised to pick him up on the way home. Alix didn't hear a word of what I said, and I decided his passion for wild birds probably equaled that of Audubon.

Walter joyously hopped out of the car in front of the public library where he wanted to spend the day. I agreed to look for him in the reading room when we were ready to go home.

Davy and Dennis wanted to see the "big house, with all the statues in the front yard," and I knew they meant the Durston dwelling. It was the largest in the village, a monstrosity in brick and marble, containing the worst elements of about half a dozen types of architecture. When Mrs. Durston planned her dwelling, she must have been influenced by the Taj Mahal, the Kremlin, the Vatican, the White House, the Grand Central Palace and the old

family bungalow. She had great means to indulge herself. After the death of her husband, she had sold her interest in the village pottery (founded by her husband's father) for four million dollars.

Of course, any child, and especially a poor one who lived in a shack, would have been impressed by the size and ugliness of the Durston residence. The twins, their imaginations thoroughly fired, had wanted to visit it every time they came to the village. One day they heard the sound of beautiful music coming out of the windows, and they stood entranced—fascinated as Odysseus had been as he watched the columns of smoke rise from the Halls of Circe and heard the siren's song floating across the vale. What puzzled the twins was the fact that nobody was ever seen walking on the lovely lawn and promenades, under the arbors and pergolas; but that perhaps only added to the scene's other-world enchantment.

When the twins peered through the wrought-iron fence which surrounded the ten acres of garden and house, they were a pair of little peasants, gazing with wonder and awe upon the splendor of the baronial hall—gazing without envy, without hope, and with the best of wishes, had they consciously realized them, for the privileged family inside. There were dryads and fauns and elves on the lawn; there was an artificial waterfall and a big pond with lilies in it. The spring flowers were lovely, but except for the big garden party Mrs. Durston gave every June, when her guests exclaimed over the lovely spread of bloom, nobody ever seemed to enjoy the grounds except Davy and Dennis—who had never been inside them. I asked the little boys if they would like to go into the big house, but the very thought of it frightened them, and it amused me to picture Mrs. Durston's decomposing face if I walked into her sumptuous abode with a couple of barefooted youngsters, dressed in rags and smelling of cow manure. I was tempted but decided it wouldn't be fair to the Otters.

Mrs. Durston had one of the best cooks in northern New York, and when Katy and I had dinner with her we enjoyed ourselves, even if she did speak slightly of village and country life. She spent her winters in New York and Florida, and said that she came

back to her village home only to rest; that the village itself had "nothing to give her socially."

But the truth was, Mrs. Durston preferred being a big frog in a small puddle. She had never been suitably recognized in New York or at Palm Beach, but in the village her elaborate manners, her wealth, and the size of her house impressed everybody. She tried hard to be stylish—bought her clothes in the best shops, but might just as well have saved money and got them in Flag's or King's village stores. Even a hat from a fashionable shop on Fifth Avenue looked—the minute she put it on her head—as if it had come from the Army and Navy store. In a more humble role, spared the need of constant competition with her superiors, Mrs. Durston might have been the contented little *hausfrau* nature had designed her to be.

Her house and grounds occupied an entire block, and the twins wanted to walk around it. Somebody had told them Mrs. Durston was the richest lady in the world, intelligence which pleased them very much. They seemed to take great pride in the lady's wealth—it cheered them to realize somebody had so much money. If Mrs. Durston had lost it, they would have felt correspondingly aggrieved. I couldn't understand it, but there it was. I walked around the block with the children, then suggested that we go elsewhere; but the twins wanted to stay. They thought perhaps they might hear the music again, or, better still, they might be lucky enough to see the Rolls-Royce drive out the gate, and certainly that would be worth hanging around for. The Rolls-Royce was driven by a colored man—the first colored man the twins had ever seen, and they might catch a glimpse of Mrs. Durston herself, in the back seat, all pearls, scarfs, plumes, feathers, drapes, with corresponding flutterings of her arms, hands, nose, eyes, eyelids and eyebrows.

I could tell by Jennie's anxious eyes where she wanted to go, if she was too modest to ask. Flag's Department Store was exhibiting a model kitchen—Mrs. Otter had seen it, and she had thrilled Jennie with descriptions of its neatness, shining whiteness, lovely fittings, gadgets and amazing labor-saving devices. It was Jennie's

turn to be rapt when we drove over to the store and she got inside of what must have been like a tabernacle to her. The bright linoleum, the white muslin curtains, fine linen, vases of geraniums and petunias, lovely dishes, great white sink and stove and refrigerator, exquisitely appointed breakfast room—they made the little girl's face shine with happiness.

Indeed, the excitement seemed more than she could stand. Noticing her quickly flushed cheeks and rapid breathing, I wondered if it had been wise to bring her here. Certainly, it would be difficult for her to reconcile herself to the kitchen at Otter Hill again, after spending the day in this one, which I was certain she wanted to do. Jennie was the only one of Mrs. Otter's flock who did not give the impression of robust health. The other children were ready to leave after a reasonable stay in the model kitchen, but not Jennie. "I want to stay a long time," she panted. As we left her, I wondered who was the happiest; Alix in the park with his wild ducks, Walter in the library surrounded by books, or Jennie in the model kitchen. "Where do you want to go now?" I asked the others.

"To the police station," said Mickey.

Mickey was popular with the two officers on duty. Officers O'Connor and Shimmmler were old friends of his. Bored with each other's company and the uneventful day, they were glad to have visitors. They invited us to inspect the cells, where two prisoners, a drunken man talking to himself and another with a black eye, were languishing away. Mickey stared at them with a grin on his face, entirely without disapproval, but obviously without pity either. The jail depressed me and seemed to frighten the smaller Otters and when I could do so, I thanked the officers for showing us around and suggested leaving. But Mickey was fascinated and he wanted to stay. "Calvin spent the night here onct," he told me.

"Yes, but not for stealing," said Rosie.

Rolf and Rosie were disappointed because there was no ball game scheduled on the village athletic grounds. Unhappily the doors were closed, and we couldn't stop at the high school, either, to look at the pictures of the boxers, runners and wrestlers in the

gymnasium. But I promised to give Rolf a fine baseball and a bat, and to buy a pair of roller skates for Rosie. She had long coveted a pair she'd seen in Flag's Department Store—although where she would use them I didn't know.

Meanwhile, the twins were divided between a longing to sit at the soda fountain in the drugstore, and their old ambition to visit the sausage factory. Little Molly trudged along the street at my side saying not a word. Surrounded by trees, bushes, toads, snakes and hornets' nests, Molly was her proper self, but in the stuffy village she lost her delightfully aggressive personality—became solemn and awed. Rolf and Rosie had peered at the soda fountain many times, through the windows, but nobody had ever taken them inside. When I put them on stools, with Molly between them, and raspberry sundaes before them, they were so excited they could hardly eat. At the sausage factory, however, they were more at home.

Every time the butcher fastened an empty tube-shaped skin to the end of the sausage pipe, and turned on the machine which forced the pulpy meat from the pipe into the sausage skin so that it swelled like an elongated balloon, the twins and Molly burst into gales of uncontrollable laughter. "Oh, we wanna stay here a long time, don't we, Rosie?" said Rolf. The butcher gave us samples of his bologna and liverwurst, which we ate right on top of our raspberry sundaes.

"And now where do you want to go, Molly?" I asked, after half an hour of sausage manufacture.

"To the barber shop," she piped.

"God bless you, Molly, that's where I want to go myself, because I need a haircut."

There were several customers in the shop, and I had to wait for my turn. Molly was all eyes and solemnity. It seemed incredible to her that people should come to a shop and pay good money just to get their hair cut. At home, Mr. Otter was the family barber. He owned his own pair of clippers, and he liked to use them. Once a month—usually on Saturday—he barbered until it got dark, tak-

ing on one Otter after another. Mrs. Otter hated to sweep out the golden drift their hair made on the kitchen floor. But with all her ingenuity, she could find no use for it.

After I'd had a good village haircut, Molly and I drove to the library. We found Walter in the reading room, earnestly perusing a book. From the walls Plato, Aristotle, Socrates, Shakespeare, Dante, Spinoza and Milton all seemed to look down, with approval, upon the studious youth. Walter had found a copy of the *Odyssey*, and I'm sure he already felt like a man who had seen the ocean.

Alix sat at the edge of the duck pond, feeding a mallard from his hand. He hated to leave.

The twins Davy and Dennis had discovered a hole under the fence around Mrs. Durston's parklike grounds, and had wriggled through. Hiding behind bushes, they had seen and heard marvelous things: the piano had played, the colored man had come out to water some flowers, and they had seen him plainly; then Mrs. Durston, the great lady, had walked up and down a little path six times. And she was dressed just like a man, in long pants, only the pants were silk ones, and they were the same color as Jennie's dress.

I retrieved Jennie from the model kitchen, Mickey from the jail, Rosie and Rolf from the sausage factory where they were enjoying a second round of liverwurst.

Having collected them all, I drove back to Otter Hill. Lena was picking wintergreen along the roadside, and after I let the children out of the car, they surrounded her and commenced telling her about their adventures in the village—I heard them say Canada geese, Lucky Tiger Hair Tonic, blackjacks, tame wild ducks, liverwurst, and Rolls-Royce.

I found Geoff sitting on the railing of the red iron bridge.

"I bet you forgot to see Father Justin about old Corry," he said accusingly.

"I did indeed, Geoff, and I'm very sorry. But I'll go in again tomorrow."

"Never mind, you don't hafta bother," said Geoff, cheerfully. "Corry's found the place where he used to live and it's burnt down to the ground."

I quickly turned to look at Red Maples. But there it stood glimmering through the trees, untouched by smoke or flame.

"Poor Corry," said Geoff. "He wasted so much of his strength lookin' for his old house. Then I got an idea, and do you know what I did? I took him to what's left of a house that got burnt down 'bout fifteen years ago—it's up the road half a mile—and I tol' 'em that musta been where he usta live and he believed me. You shoulda heard him stand there and shout—guess he musta thought it usta be a bad house, or a haunted house, and he hated it and was glad it got burnt down. Anyway, he's cured o' burnin' down things, and folks can feel safer now ta have him around."

"Geoff, that was a great thing to do."

I stood looking at the boy's engaging, serious face for a few minutes, almost tempted to tell him, for a reward, that it was my own house, Red Maples, which had once been Corry's home.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Holy-of-Holies

*I*t was music that helped bring Mrs. Otter and Lena together, after their unhappy start. Lena played the piano very well, and nature had designed the Otters to be a musical family.

They had talent, but no instruments to play on, except for Mr. Otter's battered old accordion, in which he once found a nest of field mice when it turned up in the strawberry patch after being missing for two or three weeks.

One of the family's most precious possessions was an old photograph album, covered with mother-of-pearl, which Mr. Otter had brought along from Prague. When one opened the cover, and looked at the family ancestors within, a small music box hidden in the binding played a little Bohemian folk song. Mr. Otter once rendered a German version of it for me—the original Bohemian text, he said, was practically untranslatable. Everybody brightened when Mrs. Otter, as a special treat, took the album down from a shelf in the parlor, and told the children about the pictures while they listened to the music. They always showed it to their company.

Four-year-old Molly had the little silver calliope in her throat that piped every time she talked, Mr. Otter nursed a tenor, pleasing if not very strong, Mary sang soprano in the church choir and Mrs. Otter owned a husky contralto that could be heard within a radius of half a mile when she hurled it, like sticks of dynamite, across the windy hilltop.

Mr. Otter was a magician with his accordion. After a few glasses of cider had moved him to give a recital, his entire family gathered around to listen with appreciation. Even the livestock seemed hypnotized. Mr. Otter played Czech folk songs, Old World waltzes, snatches from the operas, and when he improvised, with his eyes fixed dreamily on the lovely countryside spread like a fan below Otter Hill, what strange reedy melodies the man plucked from the accordion keys and sent dancing across Smoky Valley! I couldn't decide what I enjoyed most—the lovely music Mr. Otter made, or the sight of his appreciative family while he made it! Mr. Otter often remarked that it was his dream to have a piano in his house—a dream he never expected would be realized.

But one morning in mid-July, a heavy truck containing a huge rectangular box chugged up Otter Hill, barely making the steep grade, and a few minutes later exclamations of delight, and ringing cries of joy coming from a dozen throats could be heard reverberating across the countryside.

Not long afterward little Jennie came flying down the hillside

like a yellowbird, completely out of breath when she reached my side in the garden. All she could do was look mutely at me out of starry eyes in a face transfixed by joy. After she had caught her breath, she begged me to come over right away, "to see what came for us, in a great big box."

Jennie's excitement was very infectious. I took her hand and we marched down the road. Neither one of us said a word. I could feel Jennie's pulse beat in her wrist; she was too excited to talk, she wanted me to wait and see for myself! We climbed the hill. Even the petunias Mrs. Otter had planted under the kitchen windows seemed to be nodding their vari-colored heads in a knowing way. A flock of chickens, gathered on the lawn, was listening intently, and when we had scattered them in all directions Jennie led me up the rickety verandah steps through the kitchen into the cavelike front parlor.

There stood a brand new, very shiny upright piano, with Lena playing on it, a piano that couldn't have looked more out of place had one come across it in the middle of a tamarack swamp.

Lena was playing "The Song of the Evening Star," from Tannhauser. The entire family (except Mrs. Otter, who was bustling in the kitchen, trying to look indifferent) was gathered around, their faces blooming radiantly in the tremendous experience of it.

There was something almost sacramental in the atmosphere. The moment was so precious to the Otters, no outsider, like myself, should have been present. Old Corry was sitting in a corner drinking a cup of tea Mrs. Otter had given him, which he presently put down to rub his hands together in delight. "I have always found a cup of tea a soothing thing," he said, "yet the sound of the piano so excites me, I cannot hold the cup. The girl plays well," he added, catching Mrs. Otter's eye. "She has great feeling for the song. Now the father may rest his accordion for a while. Let the young people make the music."

I praised the piano for being lovely to look at and having a fine tone, and Mr. Otter modestly remarked a thing like that was much too good for them and their shabby old house. As I walked back to

Red Maples, I wondered if the presence of the piano in the shack would have some kind of sociological effect on the family. I had noticed that the parlor in which it stood had just had the first good cleaning I could remember.

Mr. Otter had once seen a piano in a Bohemian castle, when he was a little boy—but he had never touched one. Having no money to spend on beer, he had probably never put a nickel in one in an American saloon. To the feudal-minded Otters, the piano was a fabulous instrument—the symbol of wealth and aristocracy. It happened that up until that time we owned the only piano in this poverty-stricken community, where the soil, rocky and sandy, made farming poor and luxuries—even necessities—scarce. When the Otters visited Red Maples, the sight of it seemed to enchant them.

Mr. Otter looked upon it with longing eyes, almost as if it had been a breathing entity—a beautiful woman he would have liked to woo. Here was a man, I told myself, who shouldn't have gone to work in a steel mill in Pennsylvania when he landed in this country twenty-five years before with Mrs. Otter and his immigrant's pack. Truly, he should have remained in New York, gotten a job playing his accordion and raised his musical family there. In Smoky Valley there had been no one to recognize or foster the Otters' musical potentialities, no one to help them achieve the artistic distinction for which nature might have equipped them. Here they merely achieved the name of being the second biggest family in the countryside.

(The *biggest* one were the Pirras—an Italian family to whom the Otters, for some reason, did not speak, an amusing situation which brought to mind a saying of Cicero's, "Cato mirari se aiebat, quod non rideret haruspex haruspicem cum vidisset." ["Cato used to say he wondered why one soothsayer did not laugh when he saw another."] The Pirras' home, which lay in the valley flats, was quite as ramshackle as the Otters' hilltop abode.)

To step into the Otter kitchen, indeed, was like stepping into a black hole of Calcutta. Mrs. Otter's white Leghorns had been

known to lay eggs in the corners of her front parlor. In summer and fall, black hordes of flies buzzed against the windows, and after a fly-swatting contest put on by the boys, their viscera dripped from the walls, and the family trod on gory corpses by the hundred.

During the cold weather, when doors and windows were shut, it often required five minutes' stay in the Otter dwelling before one's olfactory function became sufficiently depressed to make the closeness bearable. As for Mrs. Otter's kitchen, I doubt whether all the perfumes of Arabia could have sweetened it. But no woman who worked all day long in the fields in summertime could keep her house immaculate, and when winter came, what could she do with a kitchen in which eighteen people lived and ate and worked and played—often slept and sometimes were sick in? Mrs. Otter could do little, and the fact never gave her a single gray hair. She didn't believe in germs, anyway.

Mrs. Otter's kitchen floor was hardly the kind one could use for dining—but who wants to eat from a kitchen floor?

In the succeeding days things began to happen to the shack on the hilltop. The Otters determined to live up to the piano, to attempt to create for themselves a new standard of existence, commensurate with what its ownership implied.

Mr. Otter, in a fit of enthusiasm, painted the trim—as it stood it was no fit tabernacle for the holy-of-holies that graced the front parlor. Mrs. Otter, likewise inspired, gave her dwelling the first good cleaning it had received since the family moved in, winding up by papering the walls, and painting and varnishing the woodwork.

Mary made curtains out of material secured in King's General Store, and she cut pictures out of magazines and put them in Woolworth & Co. frames. Lena, accompanied by Jennie (who, during this siege of housecleaning and interior decoration, walked around looking as if she were in heaven), caught rides to the village sometimes two and three times a day, coming home with chintzes, pictures, bowls, vases and other ornamental knickknacks for the shelves and tables. Lena spent her money freely, and for once Mrs. Otter had nothing to say.

William attended another country auction, and for seven dollars secured a three-piece green plush parlor suite. The roof was covered with tar paper so that rain would not leak upon the piano; the floor was propped up and fortified so that the piano would not crash through the rotting timber into the cellar. With improvements like these, and a bowl of fresh flowers on it most of the time, that piano gradually came to seem less astonished at finding itself in the shack on Otter Hill.

It was going all the time, too—there was usually a cluster of Otters waiting for their turns on the revolving wheel, to play Chopsticks, Mary Had a Little Lamb, and Robin Ree, on a Tree, Saw a Cherry One Two Three. The children carefully washed their hands before touching the keys, a condition which often spread to their faces. I viewed the situation not without concern, because the little Otters did not seem altogether natural when they were overclean. I had always considered that part of their charm lay in the rose-dye shining through the scum on their faces. But my apprehension that the Otters, and with them, their residence, were about to lose the picturesque distinction which had so endeared them to me, was groundless.

One day, after the piano had been in the family about a month, the Otters invited me to spend an afternoon with them. They wanted, pardonably enough, to show off their home as they had fixed it up, and for me to view the piano in its new setting. I left Red Maples full of pleasurable anticipation, but as I made the steep ascent of the hill, I heard sounds of lamentation coming through the windows, instead of the usual music and song.

Molly was sitting on the chopping block, crying hysterically. When she saw me, she dove through the hole in the verandah lattice work like a frightened rabbit. Davy and Dennis lay under the thorn-apple tree, mixing the salt of their tears. Geoff sat on the verandah roof, in stony silence—away from everything. Coo-Coo in her high chair parked on the lawn was screaming at the top of her lungs, although she couldn't have known what it was all about.

Fluffy had joined howling in the general lamentation, Rosie the cow was mooing, and Billy the goat, having stopped attacking the clothesline, was bleating out little distress signals. The fowl were cackling apprehensively; certainly the grief abroad was of an infectious variety.

I half expected that somebody had just been killed. Every time I visited Otter Hill, it was just in time to see one of the children narrowly escape injury, or even death—by a tractor, a buzz-saw, an ax, a plow or a piece of timber; by something breaking, falling, slipping, collapsing or exploding. Mrs. Otter let me in the kitchen; she, too, was highly distressed about something.

Mr. Otter, usually so cheerful, seemed very crestfallen. Mary's eyes were red, and William looked deeply humiliated. The little girls, in a damp huddle behind the kitchen stove, had just stopped crying, but it looked very much as if they were going to start in again. In a hurried check-up, I accounted for them all as being intact and uninjured, and knew I wouldn't have to send home for my first-aid kit. It was something else.

Then Mrs. Otter, a little reluctantly I thought, asked me to sit in the parlor, where they entertained their company, and at once I knew.

It was gone—it was gone! Acutely aware of my discovery, the Otters did not know where to look, and neither did I. Poor Mary wept without shame now. If one of the Otters had lost a finger, or part of an ear, he would have grinned stoically and borne it, but losing the piano was different. Mrs. Otter, rarely at loss for words, didn't seem to know how to begin.

Trying to keep the chagrin out of her voice, she explained the situation. After purchasing the piano from Flag's Department Store, they hadn't been able to keep up the weekly payments, and so the store had sent out their driver in a big truck to fetch it away.

Late that afternoon, Lena spoke to me when we met near the red iron bridge. "It's all my fault," she said, bitterly. "Mary got a

job in the village, tending a baby for the summer. She always wanted a piano, so I gave her enough money to make a payment on one, without letting Mrs. Otter know about it."

Lena fished for her handkerchief, a fine lacy one. "But the piano made a hit with Mrs. Otter right from the beginning. She was really all ears whenever I played, although at first she pretended not to be listening. Her manner towards me, by the way, is becoming friendlier all the while even if she hasn't spoken to me directly yet. Yesterday I heard her ask Davy where 'Lena' was—I can't tell you how flattered I felt to hear her use my name. But the family whose baby Mary tended moved away from the village, and she lost her job. Mrs. Otter hadn't an extra penny, and neither had the boys, and what with the wristwatch I bought for William—that's a secret, too, from Mrs. Otter—I wasn't able to help with the payments that Mary expected to take care of herself. So they took the piano away. But," finished Lena, vehemently, "some day I'm going to get them another one, if it's the last thing I do in this world."

After the piano had been taken away, the Otters lost interest in the appearance of their house.

When the holy-of-holies departed from the tabernacle the front parlor had become, that room gradually reverted to its former squalor. Nobody, excepting little Jennie, seemed to care how it looked any more. Mrs. Otter commenced to use it for a storeroom again and the plush sofa on which she put the baby to nap soon became spotted and stained. Because it was the coolest room in the house she often did her washing and ironing there. Even the chickens, flying through on their way to the back yard, realized that old times were back again.

Sometimes I met little Jennie on the road, looking desperately unhappy. Her face flushed, her eyelids twitched, her mouth became convulsive when she spoke about the piano. She was always thinking about it. She hadn't loved it only for itself, but for what it stood—an era of better living at Otter Hill. Now that the piano

was gone, Jennie realized the new era had gone with it, probably never to return.

Mrs. Otter told me that Jennie had loved the piano so well she used to creep out of her bed in the middle of the night just to make sure it was there—and to delight in its presence. To be sure, night-time was the only time Jennie could have it all to herself. More than once Mrs. Otter had found her, playing the softest notes on the keys made spectral in the moonlight showering through the high parlor windows. Jennie mourned for the piano as for somebody dead and buried.

CHAPTER TWELVE

A Garden Begins to Grow

*T*he small Otters spent as much time in Otter Creek as they did on the surrounding dry land. "There ain't no dry land ducks in this fambly," Mickey told me one day.

It was fun to sit on the railing of the red iron bridge, overgrown with woodbine and clematis, and some poison ivy, and watch them perform aquatic stunts. The babies went in naked, and the little girls wore nightgowns for bathing suits. They survived duckings and even prolonged immersions, accidental or otherwise, with shouts and laughter. They were usually dirtier when they came out than when they went in, for in spots the creek bed was a wallow of black muck and decaying organic matter. One steaming morning in July I found Lena sitting on the railing watching the children churn up the water into liquid mud. She looked radiantly happy as she dropped pebbles down on their heads, and they shouted up at her.

"She smiled at me this morning," Lena told me, happily. "It was the first time."

"Who smiled at you? Mrs. Otter?"

"Yes, there was no doubt about it," replied Lena. "Nobody else was in the room. She really began to like me, I think, when I commenced giving Mary and Jennie piano lessons. My, I'm grateful to you and your wife for that secondhand piano you gave us. Now, to tell the truth, I think she's going to speak to me first," finished Lena, happily.

That, I realized, would be a great triumph for Lena, and no small concession for Mrs. Otter to make. "But I won't speak first—" I can still hear my little sisters say it to my mother after they had quarreled among themselves and she attempted a reconciliation.

Lena was as gay as a bird that morning. She hummed a tune and blew a kiss to young Rolf who was looking up at her adoringly. The girl's country sojourn had warmed her skin and emphasized the crops of freckles on her nose. Still, nobody would ever have mistaken Lena for a dairy maid. But her eyes were clearer now, probably because she no longer felt the need to be so suspicious of everybody. The hothouse blossom Lena had always reminded me of was blooming like an old-fashioned rose, growing on a bush outside the kitchen door.

It was a miracle, considering her residence (Lena lived in the barn as much as in the house) how she managed to look as if she were staying at the Ritz. But I'd seen smooth, shining flowers growing in dumps out of the ash heaps. Lena, like little Jennie, had been born with elegance, and she would emerge immaculate from a pigsty. Seeing them together now, it was obvious that Mrs. Otter, whose resentment had vanished, was beginning to enjoy having a girl like Lena around.

Certainly, she was taking pleasure in the girl's beauty, her lovely clothes, and the natural vivacity which, so long hidden away, was now sparkling like a precious stone held in the warm sunlight. It was touching the way the eyes of the little boys would light up when Lena showed herself in a pretty new dress, something bright and colorful for them to admire.

Lena knew she could please the Otters with her shining raiment,

and I guessed it was no penalty for her to have so many admirers to dress for. She embellished her appearance with all sorts of ornaments, and she tied her hair in gay kerchiefs that brought out the color of her eyes. When Mr. Otter came home from work, and dropped in a chair and looked at Lena, he forgot that he was all perspiring, and tired out, and middle-aged.

That summer, Lena cured some of the children of a stubborn skin infection which had defied all the home remedies Mrs. Otter applied. I had noticed that the arms and legs of Molly, Tessie, Davy and Dennis were spotted with sores which had hard surfaces. Mrs. Otter told me it happened every summer, and that the sores gradually had to go away of themselves. I had never seen anything like it, but Lena said she'd caught the same thing when she was a little girl, and remembered how the doctor had cured it.

William drove her to the village drugstore where she procured remedies. She rounded up the children twice a day, scrubbed the infections with hot water and a special soap and then applied ointment. Lena had a lot of fun doing this, and the children were charmed with the personal service from her. All the other little Otters wished they had sores, too, for Lena to cure. After ten days of treatment the lesions vanished, and Mrs. Otter's warming attitude towards Lena became one of open admiration.

It was, indeed, Mrs. Otter who spoke first.

Lena kept me posted as to the various stages of Mrs. Otter's recognition of her. At first, Mrs. Otter had felt very shy, and spoke to Lena only when the others were around, and never directly. She began by saying "good morning" and "good night," and Lena was wise enough to accept such evidence of favor as though a queen were bestowing it. She was even careful not to presume upon the intimacy after Mrs. Otter called her "Lena" for the first time.

Her attitude was a proper combination of demureness and humility. Then, almost overnight, the pair became the best of friends, and couldn't say enough to each other. When the children found Mrs. Otter accepting Lena at last, their pride in her, which they had at first concealed, simply became enormous. They fol-

lowed Lena everywhere, almost worshiping. She constantly delighted the small Otters by opening her boxes and bags, and showing them all the lovely things she had brought to Otter Hill. Jennie adored her; Lena stood for everything the little seven-year-old girl coveted and admired.

It was good to come upon Lena surrounded by a cluster of the children, reveling in the attention she gave them, admiring her rings and bracelets and necklaces, smelling of her perfumed handkerchief, and begging her to remain at Otter Hill "for good." In the warm air of the affection showered upon her, Lena had a blooming of her own. But I could never decide, even long afterward when Lena had gone away, which had been the greatest beneficiary: whether Lena had been most good for the Otters, or whether the Otters had been most good for Lena.

Calvin was the only Otter who couldn't give in to her. I often caught him on the side, watching her suspiciously, and responding curtly, and rather sourly, to the bright remarks and smiles she dropped him. He would walk away, and sit down on the chopping block or drop in the grass, with an odd, resentful look in his eyes. It appeared he didn't want to watch her, yet found it impossible not to. Lena, it seemed to me, was lovely enough to cause dissension between any two brothers. As for her, I marveled how any girl could make a choice between two young men, both so manly and so attractive, even in their patched blue overalls. But I didn't doubt that Lena would win Calvin, too, as she had won Mrs. Otter. She spent a good deal of her tiny income buying presents for the family.

Lena planted a garden that summer, the first one she had ever had. It was pleasant to watch her excitement in it. William dug up a plot of ground which Mrs. Otter said she might have—but the girl would allow no one to help her put in the seeds. She insisted upon dropping them with her own hands. Lena never dreamed that she wasn't to see the fine floral showing her garden made late that summer—she was gone long before her snapdragons, asters, zinnias and marigolds blossomed so gaily in the mild September sunshine. And how impatient she was after her planting, how she longed for

rain to wet the ground, how hard it was for her to wait until the seeds sprouted, how delighted she was at the first sign of green and how she worried about late frosts!

Mrs. Otter's admiration for Lena when she discovered this latest ornament in the girl's character knew no bounds. Anybody who loved to plant a garden and tend green growing things was a kindred spirit. Lena's garden had commenced to grow.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Coming-out Party

One day Katy, out for a short walk, found Lena, very scratched and sun-tanned, busy in a roadside blackberry patch.

Her fingers fairly flew, Katy told me, as she stripped the bushes of their luscious fruits for Mrs. Otter to put up in jams and jellies. She had already filled a gallon pail, and said she could hardly bear the thought of leaving a single berry behind, even for a bird to eat.

Lena told Katy she didn't care if she never saw the city again, that she would be utterly content to spend the rest of her life in the country, growing flowers, raising vegetables and picking berries. "Poor thing," murmured Katy, "she must have had a bad time to feel like that already. She's so young." I reiterated my old belief that almost any decent person whose former associations had been vicious, like Lena's, could find contentment on that innocent, pastoral, if rather slovenly Otter Hill. Katy was thoughtful the rest of the day, and that evening she announced that she was going to give a little dinner party.

"I'm going to invite Lena and the Otters," she said. "It will be my way of recognizing and accepting Lena."

It was the first party Mrs. Otter had ever gone to in America. To make herself fit for the event, she heated a washtub full of water, locked the kitchen door and washed herself all over. Such

an epidemic of scrubbing as Otter Hill had never seen before took place in that kitchen on that day. It was a charming sight to see the whole Otter family troop across our lawn, rigged out in their Sunday best, the faces of the children shining with excitement and cleanliness. They didn't look altogether natural, and I had never before so strikingly gained the impression of human beings having two countenances, one for everyday use, and one for special occasions. These were the Otters' Sunday faces, and beautiful I found them.

"Ma's got on her silk dress," said Mickey, proudly, when we greeted the family at our door.

Indeed, Mrs. Otter wore her black silk dress, and very handsome she looked in it. Her best shoes were laced over her ankles, and her hair was adorned with a rhinestone comb—that, I guessed, was Mary's doing. Mr. Otter seemed almost boyish in the green shirt and flannel trousers he had borrowed from William.

The two big boys wore white duck trousers, white shirts, and blue neckties. When laborers who wear overalls all week put on their Sunday regalia, they look so much more fresh and festive than their sedentary brothers, for whom every day is an occasion for best attire. Mary had borrowed one of Lena's gay summery dresses, and various items of her jewelry—and certainly, she had sprayed herself with some of Lena's perfume. Lena was so bewilderingly lovely I don't know what she wore. It was only that, like Snow White, she was "fairest of them all."

Geoff, Walter, Alix and Rolf wore long khaki pants and brown shirts. They looked like little soldiers. Rose, the tomboy, seemed highly restrained in her white satin First Communion dress, which old Father Justin had given her some weeks before, when she received the Sacrament in the village church. But what did my heart most good was the sight of little Jennie, who was naturally so fastidious, who struggled so hard to keep herself neat and clean.

Now she was exactly the sort of little girl she dreamed of being. She wore a yellow muslin frock, a gift from Lena, I suspected, a blue ribbon in her hair, and the tarnished ring with the stone miss-

ing had been replaced by a golden circlet with a pink brilliant that sparkled enough to please anybody. Jennie wore her new clothes with loving, self-conscious pride. She was so careful not to get her finery and herself mussed. She could ask little more of life now—she had a house that was getting cleaner all the time, another piano to live up to, and a rare creature like Lena to worship and emulate.

I was glad Katy had asked the Otters to bring old Corry along. The old fellow had ceased traipsing around the countryside, and had seemed content, of late, to help Mrs. Otter do light work in the fields, and to sit in the sunshine on the lawn and watch the children play, and tend the babies. Sometimes he fished from a big boulder in the creek, and often fell asleep over his pole. There was a warm, summery smell about his odd, neat clothes, as though he had been sleeping all day under a hot sun in a field of buttercups.

He looked a good deal like a child; seemed as eager and innocent as the smallest Otter. He could hardly wait for his turn to give Katy his present and speak his lines.

Mickey, Davy and Dennis wore red short-sleeved shirts and cotton bloomers, and Tessie, Mollie, and Rosie frocks that had come from the fifty-cent store. Little Tessie was especially lovely in her blue cape and her new blue sunbonnet. She was so pleased with them, and so glad to be going to a party, although she didn't know what a party was. She cast soft, shy looks about her, full of amiability. William carried Coo-Coo and Calvin carried Nannie. Nothing was more touching than the sight of the big, handsome boys, each carrying a baby sister in his arms. Mr. Otter had brought a bottle of homemade elderberry wine along, which he presented to me with some formality.

Mrs. Otter had picked a bunch of red Philadelphia lilies in a meadow that afternoon for Katy, and old Corry gave her a quart box of thimble berries he'd picked in the woods. "They are the last of them," he explained. "But soon the blue ones will be ripe, and they are the best of all. Picking berries is a healthy occupation. I met a stranger in the woods recently, a well-spoken and educated gentleman. He told me his doctor had advised him to pick berries

for his health. It was sound advice." The old man succeeded in giving his speech a very distinguished sound, and it was followed by an impressive silence.

To accommodate all the Otters, it had been necessary to put the extra leaves in our dining table.

We improvised a high chair for Coo-Coo and managed to find another one in the attic for Nannie. After the babies had been settled, we offered Mrs. Otter a cocktail, which she shyly accepted, but when Mr. Otter expressed a wish to see our cellar, I invited William and Calvin to accompany us, and that is where we had our drinks—leaning against various casks and barrels. The boys took their whiskey straight. One could tell just by the looks of them that they had good heads for whiskey.

We had brought a box of toys from the city for the children, and a cluster of them settled on the floor, playing quietly. There was no quarreling amongst them. The toys were equally shared. If Tessie wanted the little horse, or duck, or wooden block with which Dennis was playing, he'd give it to her without protest. The children never touched anything they weren't supposed to touch, either. All their admiration for the nice things in the living room came out in their eyes.

Mrs. Otter asked Katy if she might see the rest of the house, and as she made a tour of our rooms, she uttered surprised exclamations of pleasure over her findings. It seemed to delight her to realize that there were so many beautiful and useful objects in the world to enjoy—even if she had none of her own. There wasn't a particle of covetousness in her manner. As for Mr. Otter, I could tell how happy he was to be in our house.

He sat back in his chair, saying little, but his eyes were always smiling. He had a kind of courtesy about him which he showed to the babies, to the demented old man—even to Fluffy, who lay on the floor at his side. Alix dove into a history of American birds which I had gotten out for him, and Walter was devouring our bookcase with his eyes, much too bashful to pick out a volume. Lena played "The Blue Danube," very nicely indeed, then insisted that Mary take her place at the piano. Mary was doing credit to

Lena's teaching: already she could play "The Song of the Evening Star," "Nellie was a Lady," and "My Old Kentucky Home."

I think it was the gayest party we ever had. Katy had put out our best china, silver, crystal, and the tablecloth she usually reserved for the occasions when Mrs. Durston came to dine with us. The radio played a soft tune, the candles of pale pink that matched the roses in a low, silver bowl fluttered, the crystal glimmered, the silver goblets gleamed—and, after it was all over, I liked to remember how those childish eyes, meeting across the table in wonder and pride, seemed to say: "Is this really us?"

One might have reasonably assumed that Mrs. Otter had been too busy to teach her children the extraordinary refinements; yet I was astounded by the display of them. The children lent graces to the party which I had often found lacking on occasions celebrated by youngsters who had had every social advantage in the world.

It wouldn't have done at all to put a roast on the dining table, considering poor Mrs. Otter's partly toothless gums. There were things as simple as creamed chicken and candied sweet potatoes, and the dessert was fresh strawberry ice cream, and the biggest cake I had ever seen outside of our wedding cake. It was smothered in a coat of icing nearly an inch thick and sprinkled over with shredded cocoanut.

We lingered around the table long after the ice cream and cake had been finished. Mr. and Mrs. Otter told us stories about the old country. Coo-Coo fell asleep in Mrs. Otter's lap, and she was placed on a bed upstairs soon to be joined by her little sister Tessie. Molly struggled valiantly to keep awake; she wasn't going to miss a thing. As the evening went on, however, several little heavy-lidded boys and girls were bedded down on the verandah. I could tell that Mr. Otter, warmed and relaxed by a good dinner, pleasant talk, and a spot of brandy afterward, didn't want to get out of his comfortable chair until he had to. He had brought his accordion along, but, as it happened, didn't play on it.

When he heard that we had an old phonograph up in our attic, he asked if it would be too much trouble if William and Calvin

fetches it down. We carried the big old-fashioned machine into the living room along with stacks of dusty records. The Otters arranged themselves around it, just as if it had been a camp fire.

For the rest of the evening we listened to the old-time opera singers.

Mrs. Otter said she couldn't believe that we never played the machine any more; that all that wonderful music was bottled up in our attic, with nobody to enjoy it.

The windows were open, and the voices of Caruso, Melba, Farrar and even Patti floated across the lawn, mingled with the sleepy songs of the whippoorwills. We played a good deal of "Carmen," and "Aïda," but Mr. Otter loved Wagnerian music best; the love songs from Tristan being his special favorites. Lena and Mary made a batch of fudge, and I asked Mr. Otter to sample some grape wine I had made last fall. He tasted it with the air of a connoisseur, and pronounced it excellent. Later on I found Mickey in the little sitting room, where the pictures of the Giorgione Venuses hung from the walls. Mickey seemed completely absorbed in a study of the nude beauties, no doubt forming his first pleasing conception of the beauty that is a naked woman's. I felt a little guilty about it. Mickey probably wouldn't be the same little boy any more.

At eleven o'clock Mrs. Otter said it was time to be going. The big boys put the phonograph and records away, and the sleeping babies were collected. When the Otters stood at the door shaking hands and saying good-by, Mr. Otter put his arm around Lena, looked at her affectionately and said:

"Now what you think of our daughter?"

Lena blushed and William beamed. All evening they had filled our house with that sort of lyrical quality engaged couples seem to suffuse wherever they go. Only Calvin reddened uncomfortably; I fancied he would have had a much happier time if Lena hadn't been present. I kept wondering what he had against her, what he couldn't overlook in her that Mrs. Otter had come to overlook.

"Our house seems different," said Katy, after the door had closed behind the Otters and they were crossing our lawn with a lantern to show them the way.

"It's been purified by all those lovely children," I answered.

And indeed I believed it had. I'd heard many stories about Red Maples since old Father Justin had aired its history to me. The priest had tactfully skipped many of the lurid details. A man had been shot to death on the lawn of Red Maples during a drunken brawl years and years ago.

In this selfsame room, where so much innocence and freshness had tonight graced our dining table, drunkenness, crime, and lascivious old age had frequently gathered.

An aged banker from the city had habitually come here with his young mistress. One morning she found him dead of a heart attack, at her side in bed.

Businessmen on the loose, and hard-drinking sportsmen came for week ends of freedom to drink, sing, play poker, fish and shoot and eat trout and frog-leg dinners. Their wine they brought along, the song they made themselves, and the girls were provided for them by the mistress of the house.

She was the daughter of the demented old man who had sat in our living room so quietly with the Otters, listening to Melba and Farrar and Patti. She was also the mother of the girl named Red.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Calvin on the Railroad

*"Calvin on the railroad,
Calvin on the fence—
Calvin's got a girl friend—
Fifteen cents!"*

Calvin Otter, surrounded by a school of his sisters and brothers, stood in the creek up to his waist teaching Davy how to swim. The timid little twins were the only Otters who didn't swim

naturally, and Calvin was being very patient with the youngster. Katy and I sat in the shade of a little mountain-ash tree on the creek bank, watching appreciatively. Davy squealed and panted and gurgled and spit water and wanted to give up a dozen times. "You'll soon be a water-dog like the rest of 'em," promised Calvin. "It's your turn now, Denny."

Little Dennis slid down the creek bank into the water for his lesson. Davy climbed up and settled himself under the mountain-ash tree, well pleased with himself and encouraged by Calvin's praise.

*"Calvin on the railroad,
Calvin on the fence—"*

Mickey was singing the song, and this time Calvin let go of Dennis for a second, scooped up a handful of water, and shot it at Mickey. Mickey squealed—the water was cold—and backed up. "Jist for that," he said, "I'm gonna tell Curley her name. It's Hilda Greenwood."

Calvin looked at Katy and smiled. I felt sure, with a smile, with teeth and hair and eyes like that, Calvin didn't have only one girl, but a dozen.

"She lives in the village, and she's got a grandma," said Mickey, in a sing-song voice.

"Grandmothers are very nice," said Katy, invitingly.

"But this one wants ta go long, wherever Calvin takes Hilda," said Geoff, rather indignantly. He lay in the shade at my side chewing grass. It was a hot day, and there was no cooler spot in the countryside than the shady creek bank, and no more pleasant sight than Calvin Otter in the water, teaching his young brother how to swim.

Geoff, always interested in his big brothers' affairs, told everything he knew about them. Old Mrs. Greenwood, with whom Hilda lived in the village, owned a nice car, but was afraid to drive. On the nights when Calvin called on Hilda, Mrs. Greenwood would suggest that he take them out for a little ride.

Hilda would sit in the front seat with Calvin, and the old lady, with blankets and pillows, would make herself perfectly comfortable in back. Calvin would drive around for perhaps half an hour and after it got dark and they came to some good place, Mrs. Greenwood would give him permission to park.

Then, without invitation or even encouragement from him, Hilda would throw her arms around Calvin's neck. No gentleman, of course, may decently retreat from a lady and Hilda was a lovely Irish girl, with raven-black hair, gentian blue eyes and strawberry-red lips. It was easy enough for Calvin to forget about the old lady in the back seat, and to respond to Hilda's advances.

After what old Mrs. Greenwood considered a good length of time for the kind of indulgence best witnessed only by a moon and stars shining in a purple sky, she would say rather querulously, "All right, all right, children. That's about enough for tonight. You may drive us home, Calvin."

Calvin and Hilda would then detach themselves, and he would drive the ladies home.

Dennis' swimming lesson over, Calvin helped the little boy climb up the creek bank and himself scrambled up after him to join the little group we formed under the mountain-ash tree.

"I expec' I'd rather kiss a girl with her grandma in the back seat than not kiss her at all," said Geoff, reasonably.

"I ain't never kiss a girl," said Mickey. "Wonder how it feels."

"You'll find out," said Geoff. "Jist don't think about it. You're too little."

"I think I'd rather eat a piece of candy than kiss a girl," said Mickey.

"But still I don't think I'd care much about courtin' a young lady with her grandma in the back seat," said Geoff.

Calvin's face had turned pink, and I guessed he was wishing himself dead. Katy wanted so hard to laugh that the tears came to her eyes. Truly, I'd never heard of such a courtship. "Hilda's grandmother's got lots of other peculiarities, too," he mumbled,

self-consciously. "Once she moved her house almost a mile, and then—what do you think she did?"

"Tell us about it, Calvin," begged Katy. Calvin pulled on his sweatshirt, flung himself on the grass, and we settled down to listen.

The Greenwoods lived on Chestnut Street, which was in a tough neighborhood in the village. "The first man brave enough to make a public appearance on Chestnut Street wearing knickers was stoned," explained Calvin. "That's the kind of a place it was."

The Chestnut Street saloon, directly across from Mrs. Greenwood's house, was patronized by Italians, Poles, Russians and other foreigners. They celebrated on Saturday nights by breaking bottles of beer over one another's heads. When the fighting got heavy, Mrs. Greenwood would conscientiously call the police, hoping for the worst to happen before they arrived in the patrol car. She loved to watch the policemen pitch the quarreling drunks out of the saloon, and bundle the most difficult ones into the police car. She was both scandalized and edified.

The Chestnut Street rowdies plagued Mrs. Greenwood by hurling cabbage stumps, which they stole from the sauerkraut factory, against her doors. "She was a good shot, and she kept a scuttle of coal and a sack of potatoes all ready for them. Every now and then she scored a hit," said Calvin, turning over on his back in the grass.

The house on Chestnut Street was the one in which old Mrs. Greenwood had been born, and had lived all her seventy years. It was bounded on one side by the sauerkraut factory, and a neighborhood movie house, The Happy Hour, was squeezed against the other so tightly that on warm summer nights, when the windows were open, Calvin and Hilda could sit in the front parlor and listen to the singing of Jeannette MacDonald, or Greta Garbo saying "I luff you," in her lovely husky voice. "It was just fine," said Calvin. "Especially when there was a musical playing."

Calvin said that Chestnut Street was just the right place for an old lady like Mrs. Greenwood to live. She loved a good street fight,

and something doing every minute. She could entertain herself just by looking out of her parlor window; never knew a dull moment. Everything was so convenient, too; the church she went to, the bank where she kept her money, many of her old friends were all in the same block.

But ever since the trolley cars had come to Chestnut Street, thirty years before, Mrs. Greenwood had been threatening to move away to some quiet spot in the country, where she could hear herself think, or even to go back to Ireland, and stay there for good. She was always receiving representatives of the Standard Oil Company, as well as delegations of local businessmen, and shamelessly wasting hours of their time listening to proposals that she sell them the lot on which her old red-brick dwelling stood, as the site for a gas station, a warehouse, or a salesroom. It was considered a valuable location.

Mrs. Greenwood treated these important businessmen like small boys. If there were chores to be done around the house, like putting some coal on the furnace, she didn't hesitate to ask one of them to run down cellar and oblige her by throwing on a shovel or two; and one time she had sent Mr. Morton B. Townsend, the president of the local bank, out into the woodshed for an armful of kindling. Calvin didn't believe Mrs. Greenwood would ever sell the lot, even if she was willing to listen to the propositions of these local businessmen.

But one day when he came to see Hilda, the girl told him that they were going to move away—move away from Chestnut Street, out to Meadow Avenue, which was practically in the country.

"But your grandmother always said that even if she could get used to a new neighborhood, she could never get used to a new house," said Calvin. "She was born in this one, and lived in it all her life."

Mrs. Greenwood was out in the kitchen, opening a bottle of beer. "Who's going to have a new house?" she snapped, filling up a glass for Calvin. "I'm gonna take this one with me."

The old lady had finally received an offer for her Chestnut Street

lot which she found impossible to resist, and about the same time Mike Humboldt, an enterprising young businessman and president of the Humboldt Wrecking and Construction Company, knowing of her reluctance to give up her house, came forward with a novel proposal that would enable her to keep it and still get rid of the lot on which it stood.

He offered to move the house (with Mrs. Greenwood and Hilda in it) to any location she selected, within reasonable distance, for a not too exorbitant amount. Mrs. Greenwood, fascinated by so revolutionary a proposal, asked Mike to put his proposition in black and white, and this done, she carried the document to Father O'Hara, the handsome assistant pastor of St. Lucy's Church, which was just around the corner. Father O'Hara was Mrs. Greenwood's friend and counsellor as well as confessor.

She confessed to him every Saturday afternoon, rain or shine, Calvin told us. After coming home from church, she would remove three or four of the six or eight petticoats tradition said she wore when she went out, make herself comfortable in the kitchen, and open a bottle of beer.

Frequently, she shared the bottle with some lonely old bachelor or widower who chanced to be calling. Mrs. Greenwood, with her bright blue eyes and rosy wrinkled skin, was a neat-appearing little woman who knew how to jolly the men. Father O'Hara thought she would be happier in some quiet, maple-shady street like Meadow Avenue, and he approved the move. But he cautioned her to hang on to the Chestnut Street lot for a still better price.

"Meadow Avenue, although it was only about a mile away from Chestnut Street, was just like the country," said Calvin. "I told Mrs. Greenwood she'd be lonely out there after Chestnut Street, but she wouldn't listen to me. She was too excited about the prospect of moving without having to pack first, I guess."

Mike Humboldt had further interested Mrs. Greenwood by promising that she would not be separated from the public utilities en route to Meadow Avenue: her gas, electricity, telephone and

water service were to continue without interruption, and furthermore, he guaranteed that she need not miss her daily afternoon nap either—except for an occasional swaying chandelier, and frequent changes in scenery, she would not know she was being moved. Mrs. Greenwood was as excited as a child, and couldn't wait until her house got moving.

Came the fifteenth of June. The old house was detached from its foundation, placed on huge rollers, and started on its way to the lot out on Meadow Avenue. Mrs. Greenwood had often told Calvin about her travels: she had been to Ireland and back three times, to St. Anne's Shrine in Canada twice, and once to the Eucharistic Congress in Chicago, where she had kissed the rings of no less than seven cardinals. But the trip from Chestnut Street to Meadow Avenue, a little more than a mile, was the most exciting of her life.

She was a heroine while it lasted. Hers was the first village dwelling to be uprooted and moved in that fashion. Everybody was interested: groups of people came to see her off, and she held a series of impromptu farewell parties. Even the most stuck-up families had to notice her when her house, rather horribly, settled down directly in front of one of theirs to spend the night. Every phase of the journey was covered and illustrated by the local press. Mrs. Greenwood gave out interviews, was visited by the mayor and photographed with him in her doorway for the morning edition of the *Village Star*. Even strangers rapped at her door, to ask if they might see the inside of a normally fixed dwelling during the phenomenon of its migration. Hilda made tea and served it to their company. They had visitors and excitement all the time.

"Mrs. Greenwood enjoyed herself so much, she looked ten years younger," said Calvin. "It was the first time the town had ever taken any notice of her. She was famous."

On the first of July, the house, as Mike Humboldt had promised, arrived, without mishap, at its new site in Meadow Avenue, and was settled upon the cellar which had been dug for it. It looked strangely out of place.

Calvin said there were lilac bushes, apple trees and grapevines, all of which called for a little white cottage, surrounded by a picket fence—not an uncompromising rectangle of sooty red brick like Mrs. Greenwood's ancient dwelling. That house was made for a hard-living neighborhood like Chestnut Street—not for Meadow Avenue, where there were berry bushes in bloom, wildflowers sprouting everywhere, and, according to Calvin, the strangest kinds of birds flying around. Mrs. Greenwood, it turned out, was afraid of snakes, and in the country she had a vague dread of meeting a bull. Now she realized that the tang of sauerkraut, coming from the factory which belonged to her old neighbors, the Garmadingers, with whom she was always quarreling, had been a tonic to her. Out here on Meadow Avenue, all the dear familiar scents of gasoline, dust, and fermented cabbage leaves were missing.

Out on Meadow Avenue there were no Garmadingers for Mrs. Greenwood to quarrel with—and Calvin said he believed that the excitement of her long standing feud with the sauerkraut factory owners was one of the things which had kept her alive. On Chestnut Street, the old lady had kept a little garden plot, raising her own tomatoes, lettuce, onions and radishes. After a spell of cleaning and raking, she would toss, very shamelessly indeed, the stones, sticks and other debris she had collected over her fence and into the Garmadingers' back yard. They usually retaliated with a shower of wet coffee grounds, potato peelings, and wilted cabbage leaves, which Mrs. Greenwood promptly spaded into her vegetable garden for fertilizer.

Most of the village industries and business houses were concentrated on three blocks of Chestnut Street, making it a lively place. When old Mrs. Greenwood wanted entertainment, all she had to do was pull her rocker to the window and look out. There was always the prospect of a serious accident or a traffic snarl. She often gave first aid to children who had tripped on their roller skates. Nearly every lady who passed her house seemed to be pregnant, and that always provided a good deal of pleasant specu-

lation. Out here on Meadow Avenue there was nothing but trees and bushes for Mrs. Greenwood to look at.

Calvin found a job on a farm near Watertown, and couldn't see Hilda for a few weeks. One evening he borrowed his employer's car, and drove to the village, and out to Meadow Avenue.

There were the apple trees, the lilac bushes and the grape vines, but as for Mrs. Greenwood's sooty old dwelling, it was gone!

Leaving Meadow Avenue Calvin drove back to Chestnut Street, and that is where he found the old red-brick house—again settled in its proper place between The Happy Hour and the sauerkraut factory. Mrs. Greenwood and Hilda were sitting on the verandah, watching the stream of life as it flowed by. The old lady explained that it had been difficult to endure the sounds of the frogs, crickets, katydids, and hoot owls to which she had been exposed all night long out on Meadow Avenue. "Still," she went on, after she had asked Hilda to run inside and fetch Calvin a bottle of beer, "I could have stood it if I'd had to. But the thing was, my house wasn't happy out on Meadow Avenue. That's why I came back."

Mrs. Greenwood told Calvin that houses were happy or they were sad. "Houses have languages of their own, too," she explained. "And a woman who has lived in the same house over seventy years learns to understand that language perfectly. Out on Meadow Avenue, in the nighttime especially, I could hear my house *mourn*. I couldn't stand it."

After Calvin had finished his beer, Mrs. Greenwood suggested that he back the car out of the garage.

Hilda climbed into the front seat with Calvin, and the old lady made herself comfortable with pillows and blankets. "Drive out to Meadow Avenue, Calvin," she said. "I'm very fond of that lot as long as I don't have to live in it. I must have been demented when I moved out there."

When they reached the lot, she asked Calvin to park the car in the driveway, next to the bushes. "I want to smell the lilacs," she said. The old lady settled herself for a little nap, Hilda threw her

arms around Calvin's neck, and in a little while they were hugging and kissing each other to beat the band. After a while the old lady woke up, feeling chilly. "That's about enough now, children," she said. "Calvin, you may drive us home."

Some time later, I met Calvin on the street in the village, taking Hilda to the drugstore for a sundae. She was a very pretty girl, with that ripping Irish combination of black hair, deep blue eyes and radiant complexion. She seemed unspoiled and plastic and amiable. Indeed, no man should have been discouraged by a grandmother who liked to sit in the back seat.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

In the Hall of the Mountain Kings

*T*he Sunday morning following the party, the Otter jalopy, loaded down with a dozen or more members of the family old enough to worship, stopped in front of our house, and Mrs. Otter climbed out.

It was the first unsolicited visit she had paid us, and we felt honored. The formal air Mrs. Otter assumed in making her call was charming. She wore a rustling black cape (the kind that had been fashionable in 1917) and an old bonnet adorned with a bunch of purple grapes (vintage of '02) secured by an elastic under her chin.

Since we were going away in a week, Mrs. Otter had stopped to invite us over for supper that evening, if we could let her have two cups of sugar and one cup of lard—the grocery wasn't open and she'd run out of those staples. We accepted the invitation with pleasure, and Katy gave her the sugar and lard, upon which the invitation seemed contingent.

"Mrs. Otter's going to bake a pie or'a cake," said Katy, speculatively.

The shack on Otter Hill hummed with activity all afternoon. Mrs. Otter, evidently, was desecrating the Sabbath by giving her house a good cleaning, and I know that had we declined her invitation to supper, the holiness of the day would have remained unsullied. Geoff came to borrow a cup of salt, and later in the afternoon Mrs. Otter sent the twins over for a stack of newspapers (to start the fire with, perhaps) and some kerosene. The twins brought their own tin for the kerosene.

They were as bashful as they were blue-eyed, and all these requests did not come out in a single breath, but Katy carried a fairly accurate catalogue of their current needs in her mind. "Do you suppose," she said, thoughtfully, "that as long as we seem to be providing fuel, food, and illumination for the party, we could tactfully bring along some chairs for us to sit on? You know, they haven't any dining room furniture."

"They haven't got a dining room, either, and it won't hurt us to sit on an egg crate for a change," I said. But I wondered whether I oughtn't fortify myself with a cocktail or two before this supper party at Otter Hill. Much as I loved the family on the windy hill-top, their brand of existence was a bit too heroic for me.

Katy, who dressed for Mr. Otter and the big boys, fortified herself by putting on one of her prettiest frocks, taking an aspirin and slipping a bottle of smelling salts in her bag. The Otters thrive without a good deal of sanitation, and Katy was never able to understand how Mrs. Otter kept her babies so healthy without orange juice, spinach, and cod-liver oil. She'd never heard of a vitamin—and probably wouldn't have believed in them if she had.

The front door of the Otter dwelling opened directly into the kitchen. A few hens were roosting on the verandah, and I could hear a pig squeal underneath. The children, their noses flattened against the window panes, had seen us come up the hill, and Mrs. Otter was waiting in the doorway. "How do?" she cried, very formally, giving us her hand; and we were ushered into the dark, cavelike kitchen, where a kettle of sauerkraut was bubbling away on the stove.

It had been a dark, cloudy day, and what with the vines and shrubs in which the house was buried, and the unwashed windows, little light filtered into that room. The faces of the little girls bloomed like delicate flowers in the straggling yellow beams cast by the kerosene lamp, which seemed to be waging a losing battle with the shadows. The Otters had worn their best clothes to our party, and now, for a change—and perhaps as a kind of subtle compliment to us—they had put on the odds and ends of garments which we'd passed on to them from time to time.

The children were dressed in the sweaters, jackets, shirts and pants we had collected from nieces and nephews to cover up their nakedness. Mrs. Otter looked very presentable in one of my mother's old dresses, which fitted her perfectly. The minute I laid my eyes on Mr. Otter, I wondered why the suit of clothes he was wearing looked so much better on him than it did on me. It was his broad shoulders, I decided, that really filled it out and the waist his ditch-digging job kept so slim, that made it so trim about the middle. Katy once told me that the test of a well-dressed man was his ability to wear a checked suit inconspicuously.

It was a checked suit Mr. Otter was wearing today. Katy had never liked it on me while I still wore it, but I could tell that on Mr. Otter she thought it very becoming. A man, evidently, could own only one suit of clothes and still be considered well dressed.

William and Calvin came up to shake Katy's hand, with compliments for her in their blue eyes, and wearing neckties which had once belonged to me and that, up until now, I hadn't missed. I always enjoyed Katy's appreciation of these boys. She once remarked that they didn't consider her an old woman, just because she was past thirty. Truly, she dressed for them as carefully as she did for the dowagers in the best village families. "Now I give you one damn good drink," promised Mr. Otter after we had found seats in a kitchen corner. He lifted the trap door, and disappeared into the cellar.

I was sitting on an egg crate from which families of Plymouth Rocks, White Leghorns, and Rhode Island Reds had been hatched.

The big boys brought out an easy chair for Katy that used to be in one of our bedrooms. Mr. Otter, head first and then the rest of him, came up from the cellar with a foaming pitcher of hard cider he'd made from a barrel of apples he'd picked in our orchard last fall, and Mrs. Otter hastened to fetch some glasses, from which she wiped the dust with her apron. The cider was just cold enough, and it wasn't too sweet. After two portions, I commenced to feel less apoplectic—somehow, a protracted stay in the Otter kitchen invariably made me conscious of the possibility of an impending stroke—and Katy's voice turned slightly dulcet.

Mrs. Otter, who had been standing over the big iron kettle on the stove brandishing a huge ladle, announced that the sauerkraut was done. We gathered around the big plank table, which easily accommodated all twenty of us, with Coo-Coo's high chair drawn up close so that she, too, could enjoy the party.

Mrs. Otter put me at her right; and at her left was a string of babies for her to tend. Mr. Otter, in my checked suit, whispered something to Katy that seemed to please her very much, and I could tell by the animation in her eyes that she had already framed a formidably witty retort. William sat next to Lena, who was seeking his foot with hers under the table. Calvin glared at her; and again I hoped that the two big boys wouldn't eventually come to blows over this bird-of-paradise which had dropped into their midst.

On Mrs. Otter's table were the cloth, the odd pieces of china, and the old forks and knives and spoons which Katy, after a violent house-cleaning spree, had passed on to her. A pair of gaudy candlesticks, with poisonous-like flora scaling their bulging sides to the flaring, scalloped tops, was the centerpiece.

Could there have been, I asked myself, any duplicates of my great-aunt Jennifer's wedding present to us? Every time I looked about, my eyes fell on some familiar object. Certainly, it was our party, even if it was the Otter's house. During supper, Mrs. Otter got up twice, to put fuel (cut in our timber tract) in the stove to keep the sauerkraut warm, and to turn on the battery radio set

we'd given them when electricity came through the countryside early in summer and we had bought a new one. The dinner music was excellent.

So was the entertainment. That night, the Otters told us one of the best village stories I'd ever heard.

"I seen a dead man las' week," piped Molly, scraping away at her plate.

"Yes, ol' Herman Schiller. He was all laid out in his coffin, and he looked jist as natchural!" said Mickey.

"I sprinkled some holy water on him," said Rosie. "So did Rolf. We all went in ta see him laid out."

"There was candles burning around the coffin," said Davy. "But I was 'fraid ta look at old Herman. He was dead."

"Gee, but Rose was mad," laughed Geoff. "Bet she couldn't hardly wait till she got him out of the house and put into the cemetery."

"Fredolin looked sad," said Walter, thoughtfully. "I really think he's sorry his father's dead."

"You'll have to tell us about it," said Katy.

It was William who told the story. He began rather reluctantly, and I suspected it was only his obligation as one of our hosts that made him tell it. I conceived an affection for that story myself, and never felt like sharing it with anybody.

Herman Schiller, the dead man whom the little Otters had seen in his "coffin," had come to America from the Rhineland some forty years before. He acquired a few acres near the village, put up a six-room cottage, found a wife. A hard-working man, he prospered fairly. His wife died when their son, Fredolin, was ten, and Herman looked after the boy as tenderly as a woman would have done—and succeeded in spoiling him. But father and son got along very well together, doing the farm work, getting their own meals, and pleasantly scandalizing the local housewives with their loose system of housekeeping. In 1928, Herman had a long siege of illness—pneumonia, with cardiac complications—from which he emerged a tired old man. About that time, Fredolin became en-

gaged to a village girl, Rose Mollica, and when they were married, he brought her to live with him in his father's house.

Rose came from what was locally known as a mean family, and one also noted for its greed and fabulous stinginess. She wasn't popular in the village, although she never lacked men friends. Tradition said Rose wasn't averse to drowning kittens, poisoning dogs, and slitting the throats of chickens. People couldn't understand what Fredolin saw in her—unless, as the vulgar said, it was that shape of hers. Rose did have a lovely figure.

After she took charge of the housekeeping in Herman's home his health, which had been slowly improving, commenced to fail again. Rose set a mean table, and she sniffed contemptuously at the prospect of nursing a semi-invalid. She ordered Herman to stop smoking, and she was forever running to Fredolin with stories and complaints about him behind his back. Old Herman was physically uncomfortable and mentally wretched. He didn't want to quarrel with Rose, or with Fredolin, either, whom Rose could wind around her little finger.

Several years passed miserably for the old man. It was horrible to feel so unwanted in his own home. Rose continually reminded him that he owed her money for keeping house, and when he protested that he charged no rent, and that she and Fredolin were living free in his home—or made even the most feeble show of resentment—she would threaten to move with Fredolin back to her mother's. "And then who'll run the farm and bother with you and your rheumatism?" demanded Rose.

More to escape the place in which he was so unhappy than because he was religiously inclined, Herman formed the habit of going to church. At the seven o'clock low Mass a white-haired, sweet-faced old lady occupied the same pew with him. Admiration for her was presently conceived in his breast. He learned her name from the sexton, and ascertained that she was a widow.

One day he took his courage into his hands and spoke to her. He discovered that she was poor, that all her children had married and gone away, and that she lived in a little bungalow near the

church, dividing her time almost equally between both places. After brief acquaintance, she invited Herman to her house. He came again, and she gave him a dish of potato pancakes. He loved them, but Rose—because they were so much bother and she didn't care much for them herself—never put them on her table.

Herman discovered that the widow was lonely and very timid, and, moreover, dreadfully afraid of thunder and lightning. When a thunderstorm came up, she slipped across the street to the chapel, taking comfort in the presence of a life-sized statue of the Blessed Virgin. Herman understood, however, that much as the old lady appreciated the Blessed Virgin in the chapel, a man in her flat would be much more useful. The widow ended up by curing Herman's rheumatism (or perhaps it was ready to let up anyway) and he felt more than ever in her debt. Her hospitality had come to mean a good deal to him.

Probably the widow's budding dependence upon Herman for company had its psychological effect. She needed him, and he responded by growing. His health mended, and he commenced to move about vigorously and purposely. He took to helping Fredolin work the farm again. One day he informed his son that he intended to marry the widow. Rose, overhearing, rushed into the room, declaring that Herman must be crazy. "Let him marry at his age and have somebody else get the money he's got in the bank when he dies?" she screamed. It was not to be heard of.

Herman was past seventy, and in a few hours his daughter-in-law and misguided son had exhausted and intimidated him. Rose finally executed what she considered the coup de grace to his matrimonial aspirations—she confiscated his savings-account bankbook, and hid it away. Without the bankbook he couldn't withdraw money, and without money he couldn't marry and support the widow. For a few days, old Herman fumbled about, his eyes red with weeping that already had a touch of senility in it—and then apparently surrendered his notion of taking a wife.

Things might have gone on as they were, if Rose had not finally tampered with another love of the old man's.

This love was not a sample of the kind of mild affection he had been prepared to shower upon the widow, but an emotion of another—probably even a stronger—variety. It was Herman's passion for his little peach orchard.

One autumn, years before, Herman had visited a relative in southern Pennsylvania who grew fruit commercially. He came home with a gift of a dozen little peach trees. He selected a spot with a southern exposure near his house, carefully prepared the soil and planted them. He put in a protective row of hemlocks to lessen the vigor of the prevailing winds.

The following spring the little trees covered themselves with bright green foliage, and in late May, a few years later, doubtless dreaming of their former abode on a sunny hillside in southern Pennsylvania, gaily bedecked themselves with numberless pink blossoms. Herman was beside himself with joy.

His peach orchard became his only pleasure and recreation. He sprayed, fertilized and pruned the trees, watched for pests and disease, cultivated the soil around them. He was handsomely rewarded. When harvest time came, he had the pleasure of sending baskets of the delicious fruit to his neighbors and old friends. It was declared to be of wonderful color, size, shape and flavor. Indeed, Herman Schiller's peaches won prizes at the Peeble Creek County Fair, where that type of fruit was rarely exhibited.

Several months after the domestic storm which followed the announcement that Herman wished to marry the widow, Fredolin and Rose decided to buy an automobile. They decided that the only convenient site on which to build a garage was the spot where the peach trees rustled and flowered in the breeze. Rose declared they would have to be transplanted—or cut down. Old Herman nearly went frantic; he pleaded, even wept, to no avail. Rose was merciless. Then he called in several neighbors, who helped him dig up the trees and transplant them to another spot, where they had little protection against the wind and cold.

It was a hard winter, and it may be that the trees might not have even survived the uprooting. At all events, they showed no signs of

life the following spring; were no longer peach trees, but dead, dry sticks. Old Herman was heartbroken. It was a crime that Rose had committed.

He tottered about the village, muttering that Rose had deprived him of two things he held dear: his little peach orchard, and the widow for a wife. He didn't wish to live without one or the other. The peach trees were dead and he couldn't bring them back, but he would see about the widow, who was still alive, lonely, and friendly . . .

The last five years of Herman's life seemed very happy. He was away from home almost all the time. He accompanied the widow to seven o'clock Mass every morning, and from there to her home, where he spent the day. As for Rose, she declared that for all she cared, Herman could move right into the widow's bungalow as long as he didn't marry the woman. Hadn't she his bankbook tucked away, showing a balance of eight thousand dollars without the interest—his life savings? Pneumonia would carry the old man away any winter now, or his heart that she knew wasn't any too good . . .

"But Herman finally died of a stroke," said William. "He had it in the widow's bungalow, right after eating an enormous dish of potato pancakes."

The widow tried to keep him there but Fredolin moved him home. He was conscious for a few days before he died, and acted like a man who'd played a colossal joke on the world. "When I die, you go to bank, draw out my money, eh, Rose? Ya, Ya!" he was reported to have said, fairly chortling with glee.

And indeed, the old man was hardly cold before Rose presented his bankbook at the village bank to have the interest credited. There she was informed that all the funds had been withdrawn—every cent. Herman had simply reported to the bank that somebody had stolen his book, and asked for a duplicate. Rose hadn't dreamed he could be so crafty.

The eight thousand dollars had all gone to the widow. Some of it Herman had had the pleasure of spending on her personally—

the rest he gave her in lump sums. Together with her tiny income, and these gifts, she could be comfortable the rest of her life.

Herman had bought her a fur coat, a new electric stove, a comfortable sofa and bedroom furniture, and had had the bungalow repapered and redecorated throughout.

When Herman visited the old lady, she used to get him wonderful meals, and often they had fish and chicken dinners sent over from the local hotel, which was noted for its excellent cuisine. They spent long winter evenings playing rummy and listening to the radio. Rose threatened to sue, and the widow told her to go ahead.

Mrs. Otter made a very easy hostess.

She never apologized for anything, even when Mickey dropped a piece of bread and butter, upside down, on my lap, and when Coo-Coo's stove handle, which she carried to the table with her, upset Katy's coffee.

The big boys were a little ceremonial in their own home with company, but certainly they weren't heavy hosts. When the baby regurgitated, Mrs. Otter simply wiped her pink mouth with her apron. Mrs. Otter grinned with pleasure when somebody asked for a second helping of sauerkraut, and as she bent over the big kettle to fill a plate directly from the stove, she reminded me of one of Macbeth's witches amiably stirring up the caldron. It had been a dark, overcast day, and now the wind, almost perpetual over Otter Hill, commenced to blow up rain.

In a little while, a deluge poured down on the roof, and by the time we got to our dessert of wintergreen pie (made from the berries which grow so thickly hereabouts) it was leaking through the plaster and dropping on my head. To protect the piano, the Otters had repaired the roof over their parlor, but no such holy-of-holies graced the kitchen, and a few drops of rain couldn't hurt anything—like one's head—that didn't warp. I sat next to Mickey, and he commenced to ask me questions about New York, which, for the Otters, was a place out of the Thousand and One Nights.

"Does the sun ever shine in New York?" he asked.

"Never," I told him.

"Are the buildings too high for it to shine there?"

"Yes," I said.

"How high are the buildings?"

"As high as the sky."

"Do they ever fall down?"

"Sometimes."

"And do people git killed?"

"Hundreds of them. All squashed to death."

"Gee," said the little boy. "I'm glad I don't live in New York." The big boys winked at each other, but Mickey's eyes glistened with pleasure. I hadn't failed him this time. I remembered how disappointed he'd been when I told him that not all people bitten by rattlesnakes die horrible deaths.

The first wintergreen pie I had ever eaten commenced to make me feel slightly astringent, but Katy flattered Mrs. Otter by asking for the recipe. By the time dinner was over, Coo-Coo had fallen asleep in her high chair, and there was a puddle of water under the table, which the Otters didn't seem to notice.

While Mrs. Otter put the babies to bed, Katy and Lena and Mary washed the dishes, and later the ladies joined Mr. Otter, the big boys and myself in the parlor. The boys didn't smoke, but Mr. Otter enjoyed one of the cigars I gave him.

Katy looked, with appreciation, at the rug we used to have in our sun porch, and at all the tables, chairs, rockers and the sofa she'd lately dug up for the family from the Chamber of Horrors in our attic. When we first knew the Otters, about all this room contained was their framed wedding certificate and a few boxes for chairs. I will say it looked rather charming now, furnished with our discarded pieces, the piano we had picked up secondhand, and all the wedding presents we had never used.

I avoided the sofa, where Mrs. Otter found it convenient to put the babies to nap, and sank into a big chair that I used to tell Katy was the only comfortable one we owned.

Mr. Otter produced the accordion I'd given him when his old

one fell apart, after being left out in the rain one evening. Originally this was a present to me from Katy, who had decided I ought to play some musical instrument to entertain our guests; but after three lessons, I gave up, and later decided it was a shame to keep it when our neighbor Mr. Otter was so musical, and had nothing to play on.

Mr. Otter favored us with some Old World waltzes, William danced with Katy out in the kitchen, and I took a turn with Mary.

One of Mary's high school teachers had told me that at times she was acutely aware of her poverty, but I had noticed that she seemed to be quite unconscious of her extraordinary prettiness.

Katy said it was a great satisfaction for her to realize that after she had given Mary a dress she had outgrown, the girl, in all probability, would wear it, completely altered, to a dance the very next evening. In that way, I suppose, Katy vicariously enjoyed the dance, hence such satisfaction was but natural. Tonight Mary looked radiant in a frock Katy had found in a Fifth Avenue store last spring. The frock matched the string of blue beads Mary had around her neck. I recalled having given Katy the beads two years before we were married.

While Mary played the piano, I glanced through some of our books which Katy had given the Otters. They looked very attractive to me now that we no longer owned them, and I was sorry I hadn't read them all. While we were dancing, drinking hard cider, discussing books, gossiping about the neighbors, and having a very good time, somebody rapped loudly at the door, and Mr. Tanner, the constable, walked in, accompanied by two state troopers. Mrs. Otter seemed frightened, but the small Otters, who were staying up late in honor of our visit, looked keenly interested.

Mr. Tanner asked Calvin to step in the kitchen for a minute, and closed the door behind them. Katy kept right on talking, but Mrs. Otter, without compunction, got down on her knees, put her ear to the keyhole, and listened intently. It was really wonderful how Katy pretended she wasn't seeing this.

Lena looked intensely concerned, and I guessed she wished she

could be in the kitchen with Calvin and the constable. She had had much experience, and the use of a considerable talent, in placating police officers, state troopers, sheriffs and revenue men during her river career. But a few minutes later, Calvin, his face very red, looked into the parlor and explained to his mother that he had to go to village headquarters, for questioning by the police, concerning a barn which had been burnt down on the Fourth of July by a flock of rowdies with whom he had been known to consort occasionally.

The twins, Davy and Dennis, thinking that Calvin was being arrested, at once set up a howl, in which Fluffy joined, and Mrs. Otter wrung her poor hands. She was probably thinking about Election Day, two years ago, when Calvin had spent a day in jail for pushing over one of those structures of which Chic Sales is the acknowledged master builder. A man had been in it at the time.

Katy, in a passionate whisper, ordered me to accompany Calvin to headquarters, and, if necessary, swear that he had spent the Fourth of July with us, but I reminded her we had been at Alexandria Bay at the time. "Go along anyway, and see what you can do," she said.

"Bring back some ice cream, will you?" whispered Dennis, the tears rolling down his cheeks.

"Chocolate ice cream," added Davy, choking with sobs.

"No, vanilla," wept Dennis.

"I'll get a quart of each," I said, making sure I had enough money with me, not only for ice cream, but to pay Calvin's fine, if it came to that. I followed the troopers for an hour through a heavy rainstorm and Mr. Otter, who accompanied me, smoked another one of my cigars and talked very cheerfully.

"I raise a little hell, too, when I a boy," he explained.

"All good boys raise a little hell," I said, equably, for I seemed to be enjoying myself.

It wasn't necessary for me to perjure myself at headquarters, which I was quite prepared to do. Calvin explained his whereabouts on the Fourth to the satisfaction of the sheriff, and he was allowed

to go. But there was a picture at the local movie house he seemed interested in, and so I urged him to stay, loaning him the price of admission. I stopped at the drugstore for the ice cream the twins wanted and when we got back to Otter Hill, we found the women in throes of anxiety over Mickey, who had suddenly come down with a violent sideache.

Katy's professional instincts—I say professional, because her father was a doctor—were aroused, and she said she hated to leave Mickey. In the end, Mrs. Otter agreed to let us take him home, where Katy could watch him—which is just what the little boy wanted. Katy told Mrs. Otter it was better like that, because I could rush Mickey to the hospital during the night if the sideache turned out to be appendicitis. The Otter jalopy wasn't equal to the forty-seven mile trip in its present shape.

Mrs. Otter bundled Mickey up in a blanket and I put him in our car. It amused me to realize how envious the other children were of Mickey. They all wished they had sideaches, too, and it was obvious that some of them believed Mickey was exaggerating the pain. I rather did myself.

Mickey was charmed to find himself in our house again so soon. (Our Big Ben fascinated him, and he would loiter around for an hour just to hear it strike.) I knew he would be with us until we left for New York, sideache or no sideache. His brothers and sisters would come over to see him during his stay, and he would treat them with great condescension. When Katy had given Mickey a bath (he was appallingly dirty, and left an ink-black ring in the tub) and had put him to bed, he promptly fell asleep. After she had tucked him in securely and caressed his golden head with her eyes she looked up at me and said:

"Not a bad exchange for kerosene, coffee, a cup of sugar and—"

"Aunt Jennifer's candlesticks," I said.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

A Lady in a Strawberry Jam

The small Otters loved to earn money, even if there was no store near by where they could spend their pennies on ice cream cones and grab-bags and all day suckers.

One day Molly filled six evaporated milk cans with angle worms she pulled out of Mrs. Otter's rich flower garden (where a tomato plant was likely to be growing next to a clump of canterbury bells) and sold them to a party of fishermen for ten cents a can. It was a good day's work and one hundred per cent profit. Molly, her fist around the six shining dimes, and very proud of herself, flew home to put the money in the cracked china cup that was the family's treasury department. Mrs. Otter promised to buy her a warm winter coat with the money.

Molly's enterprise fired the boys with ambition, and they too resolved to earn a little money. It occurred to them that Mrs. Sprout's sweet-caps must be getting ripe and that she might want some help. They started out for her house one morning to offer their services, and meeting them on the road I gave them a lift.

Mrs. Sprout's house was a four-room cottage smothered in immense hop vines. I sat in the car and waited for the boys to transact their business with the lady. They found her sitting on the front porch, smoking a corn-cob pipe, one of her bare legs crossed over the other. Like Mrs. Otter, she shuffled around the house in her bare feet all day long. Tradition said that Mrs. Sprout slept with her bed arranged so that her feet could stick out of the window, exposed to all kinds of weather. For some reason, they seemed to require a good deal of air.

She had come to this neighborhood from an Adirondack farm last fall with her husband. Now she was a widow; in early spring she had taken Mr. Sprout back to the Adirondacks to bury him. It happened like this: one mild morning in late April, Mrs. Sprout,

shuffling about on the verandah smoking her pipe, heard a hoarse cry come up from the pasture. Her husband lay in a crumpled heap on the ground, and the bull was goring him. Mrs. Sprout reached through the open living room window for her .32 Winchester, calmly took aim, and put a bullet in the bull's head; later she said she thought man and beast had died simultaneously. It soon became known that Mrs. Sprout was a great shot, whose boast it was that she had never killed a wild duck whilst it was floatin' or a partridge or pheasant whilst it was settin' down. The bullet was removed from the bull's brain, and Mrs. Sprout kept it in a snuff box. She exhibited it to her kinsfolk when they came to mourn her husband.

Geoff was spokesman for the little party he and his brothers formed. They trooped up to Mrs. Sprout and courteously inclined their heads, half afraid to break the imposing silence with which the lady was always surrounded.

She did not acknowledge their presence in any way, and they had not expected she would. Mrs. Sprout was averse to conversation. When the country folk called on her after her arrival in the neighborhood, she met them at the door, and turned them away by saying she thought it best they'd stay home—she didn't believe in mixin' up much with folk, all that come of it was trouble and grief.

But there was nothing definitely unfriendly in the lady's manner; rather a kind of Olympian indifference, an Asiatic calm. She was a gray woman—gray, luminous eyes, gray hair, gray skin. Her features were almost classically regular, her pale skin smooth. She might have been old, she might have been fairly young. "Mrs. Sprout," began Geoff, "we wanna pick up a little extry change this summer, and come to find out if we could pick your sweet-caps. We usta pick 'em for Mrs. Sprinkler, before you bought this place offa her."

Mrs. Sprout regarded the boys for a full two minutes, puffing away at her pipe before she opened her mouth. They thought her lack of speech extremely comic. Geoff caught Mickey's eye and

wasn't able to keep his face straight. He choked and burst into laughter. "He made me laugh," said Geoff, looking at Mickey reproachfully, and then beginning all over again.

"Well, whatcha laffin' at?" asked Mrs. Sprout, after a long while.

The boys couldn't answer, they only laughed some more.

Mrs. Sprout removed her pipe from her mouth and tapped it against a dish on the verandah table. "All I kin say is, some folks have a peculiar sense of humor."

"We didn't mean to be impolite," said Walter, avoiding Mickey's eye.

The boys stood there sheepishly, trying to control themselves. But their giggles and quakings of laughter were irrepressible.

"You're the little Otter brats, ain't you?" asked Mrs. Sprout, after a good while.

"Yes, we are, but we ain't no brats," said Mickey.

"Remains to be seen," replied Mrs. Sprout. "Now, how do I know that you ain't gonna eat more burries than you pick?" she said, commencing to rock in her chair.

"Well, we won't eat no more than the robings do," said Mickey, humorously.

"He means *robins*, Mrs. Sprout," explained Walt.

"I know what he means," said Mrs. Sprout.

"We've had lots of experience picking berries," said Walter, in a businesslike manner.

"I heard your house was stinkin' dirty," said Mrs. Sprout, becoming conversational.

"Our house is as clean as yourn, if you wanna know," replied Mickey, with spirit.

"Hoity, toity, that one's got spunk," said Mrs. Sprout. "But I heard different. Besides, you ain't never been in my house, so how d'ya know? Is that man out in the car your pa? Why don't he come up and speak his piece, or ain't he man enough?"

"He's not our pa," said Mickey. "He's our chauffeur."

"Pretty high-toned folks," said Mrs. Sprout. "Well, I expect

my burries'll be ripe in 'bout a week. You kin pick 'em but don't make me hafta send for ya. Your chauffeur kin have a job, too, tell 'em that." Mrs. Sprout got up and shuffled into the house, without saying another word.

"Goddam it, I ain't gonna pick her berries, she said our house was stinkin' dirty," growled Mickey. "She kin gone to hell, that's what she kin do."

"Not so loud, Mickey," cautioned Alix. "Remember, she's a wonderful shot. She's almost as good as Annie Oakley."

While waiting for Mrs. Sprout's sweet-caps to get ripe, the boys busied themselves with the wild blackberries growing in the woods.

Geoff knew of a fruit-studded patch growing on a hummock in the tamarack swamp. One morning he headed for the patch with his big berrying pail, hoping to get at least a crate of berries out of that spot. When he arrived, he found almost every bush stripped. He looked around, and presently came upon the culprit. No, it wasn't a bear, Geoff told me.

It was a rather sheepish-looking little man, who wore horn-rimmed spectacles and was dressed in sport clothes. "You made a clean sweep of my berries, Mister," said Geoff, indignantly.

The man was mild of speech. "I didn't realize I was trespassing. You'll have to let me pay for them." He produced his wallet, and Geoff told me it was stuffed with bills, some of them fifties and twenties.

"Not many people with so much money would waste their time in the woods, pickin' berries," Geoff remarked.

"I'm picking berries for my health," said the man, probably the one Corry had met, as he pressed a five-dollar bill upon Geoff.

"Mister," said Geoff, "I heard of the gover'ment paying farmers for crops they didn't raise, but I never expected to be paid for berries I didn't pick. You don't look very sick."

"I was ill this winter. When I consulted my physician," the stranger told Geoff, "he said to me 'Why don't you go somewhere into the country and pick berries this summer. You'll see what

it does for you.' I took his advice and I'm well on the road to health again. I've been picking berries steadily for five weeks."

"I'll hafta tell my friend Curley that," said Geoff. "He's an aviator and he's s'posed to be sick, too. He usta be with the Flying Tigers in China. Comes over to our place a lot. You must have a wise doctor, Mister."

"Doubly wise," replied Geoff's acquaintance. "First, he recommended a serene, healthy occupation, that could be pursued outdoors, and enabling a detached mind and busy fingers to work in perfect synchronization; second, he recommended the one thing I'd rather do than anything else I know of."

"I like ta pick berries too," said Geoff, warmly. "But I never hadda pick 'em for my health. Mister, I know another good place 'round here I'll show ya."

Geoff led the stranger to a patch on the other side of the swamp and left him there. That afternoon, when he told me about it, I offered to drive him to the farm of Mrs. Ashley, an old friend of my family's. She had berries to be picked and I was anxious to help the boys find ways of earning money.

Mrs. Ashley's farm was only three miles from Red Maples as the crow flies, but by way of country roads that wandered through cool, dim forests, climbed gay flowery slopes, dissected rich, fragrant, humming clover fields, it was actually seven miles. Ditches along the way were knee-deep in ferns, and tall lilies showed their red heads over meadow weeds. Perennial sweet peas, lavender shaded, climbed over the fences and formed matted thickets and the sturdy Bouncing Bet was stopped only by concrete. The Ashley farm crowned a serene hilltop and the house stood in an oak grove.

The farm itself was a very good one—a real money maker. Mrs. Ashley lived comfortably in her trim, white-brick house, built about ninety years ago, equipped with all modern conveniences, and furnished with many lovely old things her grandparents had brought with them from Vermont, in oxcarts on their wedding journey. When we drove up, we found Mrs. Ashley sitting on the verandah, hulling strawberries.

"This is the last of them," she said, after making her cordial but restrained greetings. "They were an ever-bearing variety, too."

"Had the plants become poor?" I asked, taking a chair on the verandah, which was as cool as a bird cage swinging in the breeze. Mrs. Ashley shrugged her shoulders, and told Geoff that if he cared to step in the kitchen he could help himself to the remains of a chocolate cake on the table. After that, she suggested, he might go around and find Edgar, her hired man, who would be glad to show him their family of baby pheasants. When Geoff had left, Mrs. Ashley fetched a bottle of homemade current wine and two glasses.

I had known Mrs. Ashley ever since boyhood days. Her eyes were so youthfully clear and blue, one did not realize at first that she was middle-aged and pleasantly shapeless. She saw all things in the simple, harmonious sequence of the farm: the sprouting seed, the waxing blade, the ripening grain. There was something about the strawberry patch she wanted to get off her mind and since she was naturally diffident, the wine would help.

"You remember Harold MacGrath, of course," she said, after a little pause. "He's from your home town. You must have read some of his books, and perhaps seen his famous play *The Man on the Horse*—"

"*The Man on the Box*," I said.

"*The Man on the Box*. Well, anyway, until his death some years ago, Mr. MacGrath used to come up this way every spring for the trout fishing. He was always promising to bring Irvin Cobb along. They used to fish for bass at Cape Vincent, you know, and this would be on their way up."

Mrs. Ashley took a sip of wine. "One summer, it was in 1931, Mr. MacGrath brought another man, a New Yorker, along with him. Don't ask me what his name is—all I'll tell you is that he's a well-known writer of books and plays. He hadn't ever visited a farm before and he sort of fell in love with this place. It's lovely here, you know," said Mrs. Ashley. "Especially in summer. Everything seemed to delight him. He never caught any fish, he spent

most of the day roaming around in the woods picking violets and trilliums and wild strawberries."

"Picking berries?" I said.

"Yes, he loved to pick them. He had always lived in the city, and spent his vacations at stuffy watering places like Placid and Palm Beach; and he hadn't known what our deep woods or our great countryside were like. He said he was really discovering rural America up here and loving it. Then, before he left, he asked me if I'd take him in for a week or two sometime, as a paying guest. He wanted to write a book about a farm and could find the necessary material here. I told him he could come, certainly, if he was willing to take us as we were. When he got back to New York, he sent me some of his books and a nice little note, thanking me for the wonderful time he had had. I received an attractive card from him at Christmas."

Mrs. Ashley told me she never expected to see him again, but in the summer of 1935, much to her surprise, he wrote asking if it would be all right for him to come. She said yes, and, sure enough, he arrived on the designated date—sometime in mid-June. He was as happy as a lark to be on the farm again. He went around and revisited all the old haunts. He made friends with Edgar, the hired man. One of the first things he noticed was the strawberry patch. It needed weeding badly, and that seemed to bother him. "He was a kind of an old maid in some ways," remarked Mrs. Ashley, with a fond smile. "The way he kept his room was really something. His mother had raised him to pick up things after him, and it's a good thing she did, because his wife wouldn't do it for him. Every time he got a spot on the tablecloth when he was a little boy, she made him take a penny out of his bank, or a nickel, or a quarter or half dollar, depending on how big the spot was, and cover it up—to help pay the laundry. I must say it's quite an idea, but the poor boy must have dreaded mealtime."

Mrs. Ashley refilled my glass, and took up another box of strawberries to hull. "But we're too busy to bother weeding strawberries, since we don't raise them commercially, and when he asked me if

he could go ahead and weed the patch himself, I said, why, yes, but I was surprised and even a little touched."

She paused, and looked at me out of those intensely clear eyes of hers.

It took her author guest a whole week to weed the strawberry patch, and he was at it all day long. His back nearly killed him. Mrs. Ashley, rubbing it with liniment for him every night, begged him to stop weeding before he made a cripple out of himself. He got terribly sunburned, too, and the mosquitoes nearly ate him alive. Once a big blacksnake crawled over his foot and almost scared him to death. But he wouldn't give up. Mrs. Ashley sometimes fancied he thought his mother must be out in the kitchen, watching through the window to make sure he didn't stop working and all ready to holler at him if he did.

"Did the patch need weeding very badly?" I asked, wanting to laugh but afraid to, Mrs. Ashley was so solemn.

"Well, you know how strawberries and weeds flourish together. But—" she went on, raising her voice a little, "you should have seen the *way* he weeded! Evidently, the strawberry plants were very precious to him. He went about the business like a surgeon performing a delicate operation. Finally he got finished, and what pride he took in his job! I praised it right up to the skies, just like I thought his mother would have done. He said after that week he spent in the strawberry patch, he couldn't bear the thought of it going back to weed—it would break his heart. 'Now those strawberries really have a chance to show what they can do,' he said."

Mrs. Ashley's guest left before the berries ripened, going on to Hollywood, to see them make a movie out of one of his books. But that fall, she sent half a dozen jars of her famous strawberry preserve (which had won prizes at the Peeble Creek County Fair) to his New York home, and received a nice, rather badly spelled thank-you note from his wife. The author came back to the farm the next summer, for another week, and he weeded the patch again, but of course it wasn't so weedy that time. He fished a little, and never caught anything, even when they were biting. He would

only get his fishing line hopelessly tangled up, then quit in disgust and start picking berries and wildflowers. "To tell the truth," said Mrs. Ashley, "I think that besides writing books and plays, weeding and picking berries were about all he could do. He could never fix anything when it was broken. The very thought of driving a car terrified him. He'd be gone all day long, and come back just before sunset perfectly happy, with his pail full of berries—and perhaps some wonderful idea for a book or a play. As for weeding, he said he loved to see the weeds curl up and shrivel in the sun after he pulled them. He said it was a passion with him. His mother had kept a little vegetable garden in their home when he was a boy, and she had taught him to regard all weeds as personal enemies. No wonder my strawberry patch upset him so."

"I can understand that," I said, laughing. "But what about his wife? Didn't he ever bring her along?"

"Yes, she came up in 1937," replied Mrs. Ashley, solemnly. "And a more beautiful woman I never laid my eyes on. I wondered if she'd been on the stage. She danced, sang, and gave marvelous imitations. She had a lovely figure, and you should have seen her clothes! People used to drive past the house just to get a look at her when she lounged on the lawn in her plum-colored velvet slacks, which she bought in Hollywood. She was the last person you'd expect to be the wife of such a plain, mild-mannered little man."

"Did she enjoy farm life too?" I asked.

"No, I don't think she did. She stayed only five days. The second night she was here, she already wanted to go to a movie. Her husband said he hated the movies, so I drove her up to Watertown and we saw one together. There was no excitement here, she got restless, and it was so unnaturally quiet nights she couldn't sleep. She said she missed the city noises. She wanted her husband to leave when she did, but he refused. 'How can I go when I haven't weeded the strawberry patch yet?' he said. She seemed provoked, and I couldn't tell if he was joking or not. Anyway, she went on alone, and he joined her later, in California."

Sometimes Mrs. Ashley asked her guest how the farm novel was coming and he finally told her he'd given up the notion of writing it. He said he loved the farm too well to write about it; that he could write best about things he hated—things like child labor, and tenements, and war. "He didn't take the trouble to learn anything about farming in the first place," said Mrs. Ashley. "For one thing, he couldn't stand the smell of manure; it almost made him throw up. When he went in the barn he held a handkerchief over his nose. He was very timid with horses, too, and, to tell the truth, I actually believe he was even afraid of the cows. Whenever he went near one, he looked very nervous, and shied away from it a little. He liked to collect the eggs, though, and he seemed perfectly at home with my hens. One of my Brahmas had five chicks, and he called her Mrs. Dionne. He named the chicks after the quintuplets—Annette, Emilie, Yvonne, Cecille and Marie."

Mrs. Ashley's eyes were a little dreamy now, her voice pitched low. "He came up in 1937 and in 1938 and he weeded the strawberry patch each time. It was a real joy to him in '38—he stayed three weeks that summer—when, after a sudden shower, the berries turned ripe almost overnight. We'd been having a dry spell. He ate berries all day long; they never seemed to distress him in any way. Strawberries give *me* the rash. I made strawberry shortcakes and strawberry cobblers for his desserts, and for breakfast every morning, he had a big bowl full of strawberries, with cream. He gained thirteen pounds in the three weeks he was here. He felt very proud of himself."

Mrs. Ashley smiled reminiscently. "My, he was a cute little fellow, and very good company when you got acquainted with him and he got over his shyness. I suppose he had what you call charm, short though he was on looks. He loved a good snack out in the kitchen; wouldn't let me do any fussing for him or set the dining room table except on Sundays. He said the nicest things to me. Once he told me I had a wonderful disposition and that I was worth my weight in gold. 'Emmaline,' he said to me one day, 'if you were mine, I wouldn't trade you for Clare Booth.'"

Mrs. Ashley was not a woman given to making confessions like these, and I was surprised, and even a little uncomfortable. She had finished her second glass of wine, and I guessed it had gone to her head a bit. Otherwise, she would never have been so communicative. I watched a slight blush redden her cheeks, and I knew it wasn't strawberry rash. "He told me I was a very comfortable woman. Beautiful women, he said, were only a bother; there were too many of them. If he married again, he said, it wouldn't be to another beautiful woman: one couldn't be at peace with a beauty. He'd take a woman like me—a restful woman. His mother had harassed him, his wife tormented him, and now he was all ready for a woman who'd just let him be. Just let him pick strawberries all day long, I presume he meant."

Mrs. Ashley smiled to herself. "In the spring of 1939," she went on, "I had his room all done over, with wallpaper that had a strawberry design, which I hoped would please him. I waited for a letter announcing his arrival, but I received a note from his wife instead, and I could hardly believe it when I read it. She made a strange request in it."

Mrs. Ashley picked a strawberry from the quart box, looked at it critically, bit into it and handed the box over for me to finish.

"Can you imagine what she asked me to do?" she said, gravely.

"I haven't the slightest idea," I replied.

"She asked me to have the strawberry patch plowed up."

Mrs. Ashley spoke with great solemnity, and I made the proper exclamation of incredulity.

"She wanted to catch the *Queen Mary* and meet some people in London and she wanted her husband to go with her. But he told her if he didn't get in his week in my strawberry patch he wouldn't know it was spring, and besides that it would haunt him if the patch returned to weed. She begged me to have it plowed up and she hinted she'd make life miserable for him if I didn't. I couldn't believe though that he'd stay away from here just because there was no strawberry patch to weed, but I wanted to oblige her, so I wrote that the plants were old and not bearing well any more,

which was true, and that I had intended to have the patch plowed up. Of course, I mentioned this casually in my letter to her so he couldn't guess she asked me to do it."

Mrs. Ashley paused for a moment, looking rather mournful. "Yes, he was a nice little fellow, mild in disposition yet strangely excitable when something stirred him. He had a gift for extravagant speech. 'Emmaline,' he told me one day, 'I love you for your dear, plain face, and for your lack of intellectual pretension.' That was his way of telling me he liked me because I was no beauty and because I know so little, but I didn't mind. It was fun to sit on the verandah with him in the evening and listen to his stories. In the dark, when nobody could see his face, he could become very eloquent. He sent me a card from Paris, saying that even if the chestnut trees were in bloom it wasn't like spring to him because he hadn't weeded the strawberry patch."

"Then he didn't come back."

"No," said Mrs. Ashley, in flat tones. "You see, he always felt he was a bother to me here. Farmers ordinarily are too busy to take in boarders. Perhaps he thought I had thrown a hint for him not to come."

"Where is he now?" I asked. "And where is his wife?"

"He's in America, and she's in England. He came back in July, 1939, but she planned to stay the summer. Then the war broke out, and now she's afraid to cross the ocean. She's afraid her ship might be torpedoed." Was it my imagination that made me detect a note of hope in Mrs. Ashley's voice when she said this? "It looks as if she's marooned over there for the duration. But I dare say—" and in another woman this would have been biting sarcasm—"she's having a wonderful time in London, doing war work, wearing attractive uniforms, and seeing handsome officers. She took quite a fancy to Edgar, my hired man, while she was here. He's by far the best-looking man in the neighborhood, and she had a rather roving eye. There had been some mention of a divorce when her husband came back from Europe alone that summer. Certainly, she's not the proper wife for him."

"And what about him?"

"He's said to be ill. He'd been on a writing assignment all over the world and I believe he had to do a lot of flying, poor chap. You know, he was dreadfully afraid to get into a plane and he told me he was always in a state of terror until it got back on the ground again. It was probably so much flying that made him ill, together with the spectacle of human suffering and misery he had to witness on his writing tour. He's a sensitive, big-hearted man, and he said he couldn't endure seeing people, and especially children, suffer. He'd been in Spain for a while, and I believe he saw terrible things there."

"Has he written to you?"

"No," said Mrs. Ashley, sadly. "All I know of him is what I read in the paper occasionally. It must be he considered my letter to his wife an invitation for him to stay away. Incidentally," Mrs. Ashley went on, "I never had that strawberry patch plowed up at all."

"Speakin' about berries, Mis' Ashley," said Geoff Otter, coming out on the verandah from the kitchen, where Edgar had been showing him his guns, "I met the champion picker of these parts in the woods this mornin'."

"And who is he?" asked Mrs. Ashley, with interest.

"I don't know what his name is," replied Geoff, "but that's his pitcher on the piano in your front room, so you must know him too. Is he stayin' here?"

Mrs. Ashley's cheeks again became suffused with strawberry pink. Her voice trembled. "No, I don't know where he's staying. Perhaps at one of the lake hotels."

"Well, I found him a good place to pick and we had races to see who could fill up quart boxes first, and he generally won. I sure likta hear him talk, even if I don't allus understand what he's sayin'."

"What did he talk about?" asked Mrs. Ashley, in muffled tones, getting up and going into the front room.

"Oh, he tol' me he wished he'd been born in the country, because

that was the best thing that could happen to a boy. He said I oughta stay here an' never even think 'bout goin' ta the city and that when I was growed up I oughta marry some nice plump farm girl and live ta be one hundred years old. He said he feels better 'round here than any other place, and he'd like ta settle down here for the rest of his life."

Mrs. Ashley was looking out of the window, down the hillside at the lovely pond which, according to tradition, kept the frosts away from her farm until late in fall. "This is a very comfortable house in winter," she said, "and the country is so lovely after the first snow. Who couldn't be content in the country in winter with all the conveniences of the city? I have them here. Oh, in winter, when the sun comes up over the edge of the black woods, and shines red on the snow! Fire in the snow! And in spring when the snow goes and the ice breaks and the streams flow through the woods again—"

Geoff and I were listening, fascinated. Even the boy seemed to realize that Mrs. Ashley was speaking monumentally.

She turned to me: "Do you know what I'm going to do? I'm going to write him a note, and tell him that I never had the strawberry patch plowed up, after all, and that it needs weeding badly."

Geoff and I drove away, Geoff happy because Mrs. Ashley said he must pick her currants, gooseberries, blackcaps, and, later on, her pears and apples, and I felt a little puzzled. The people in this countryside were plain, like the things they raised: potatoes and turnips, cornflowers and morning glories. Things like this didn't happen here. Still, I reflected, the showy lady's-slipper, our loveliest wildflower, could be found in the swamps hereabouts. It is an exotic blossom, with a creamy white head, and a smash of strawberry pink on its cheeks.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Next Door to Heaven

A representative of the Otter family was usually in attendance at Red Maples, even if it was only Rosie, the cow.

She seemed fond of our lawn, and we often found her grazing on it when we got up mornings. We were never lonely. If some of the children weren't solemnly holding down chairs in our living room, enjoying what they thought was splendor, or sitting in our kitchen hopefully waiting for cookies or a dish of cornflakes, they were playing in the barn, having a game of croquet on the lawn, or weeding our vegetable garden.

Mrs. Otter sent over cuttings of her flowers, specimens of her choice vegetables, and a nice bass if one of the boys caught a mess in Aspen Pond. Mr. Otter advised me about things like digging a well, adding a new wing to the house, purchasing a flock of hens, and Mrs. Otter (who could grow anything) was able to solve most of Katy's gardening difficulties. William and Calvin (who could fix anything) tinkered with our car, mended the hand cultivator and although they had no electricity of their own, repaired all our electrical gadgets. During our absence they kept an eye on our place; came over and straightened things out after a windstorm, watered the garden if necessary and hoed the potatoes.

The Otters had such great respect for the possessions of others, I often wished they had a better house of their own. Mrs. Otter longed to own a good house, and a fine barn.

This ambition was not long in being realized.

Early one morning, while I was in our garden staking delphiniums (which seem to bloom just to be bashed down by windstorms), Geoff Otter, walking very fast, turned into our driveway.

He was talking to himself again—I could see his mouth work. He had news for me that just couldn't wait; and he was already rehearsing it. When Geoff saw me, he gave a whoop and started to run.

Only yesterday he had come running over, to carry me off by his infectious excitement to a spring in the field at the foot of Otter Hill, where, he said, a terrible tragedy had occurred. And I had found it so: a rabbit had fallen into the little spring, which was buried deep in sweet-smelling grass with ferns and flowers nodding over it; the rabbit had drowned, and now its body, intact but green with mold, was floating on the surface of the spring water, and three enormous green frogs were sitting on the rabbit's back, blinking up into the sky with their green-gold eyes.

Katy was in the kitchen window, and Geoff waved to her gaily. She responded with flourishes of her rolling pin.

"Say, d'ya know what?" broke out Geoff, his eyes sparkling, unable to contain himself another minute.

"No, what?" I put down my stakes and twine, prepared to be entertained. I don't think I'd ever known a boy who could be so miserable when he was miserable, and who could cram so much happiness into his face when he was glad. Geoff seemed to have nothing in material things or in the prospect of them; and yet within himself he had just about everything. What did a nice house matter, or decent clothes, or three square meals a day against that tremendous capacity for joy that could feed almost exclusively on hopes for good things to come? "Well," he was all out of breath and panting, "did ya see Lena and William and Mary drive off a little whilst ago?"

"Yes, I did, and wondered where they were going." I lit a cigarette and sat down on the bench, prepared to receive Geoff's latest revelation. "They're not going to be married, are they—that is, William and Lena?"

"No, but it would be a smart thing if William did marry Lena, and keep all that money in the fambly," said Geoff, stoutly. "They're going up ta Watertown on business and they took Mary along because they might hafta stay all night."

Geoff closely watched for the effect of this intelligence on me, and I did not disappoint him. "Came a letter for Lena yesterday," he went on, "and guess what it said? It said there was some money

for Lena up in a bank in Watertown. You know, her old man—her father—usta be a bootlegger and he put money in different banks under different names so's the gover'ment couldn't check up on 'em. Well, they jist found out he rented a safety deposit box in a bank in Watertown under another name and when they opened it up they found five thousand dollars in it all in cash. Now, what d'ya think of that?"

"I think it's very nice for Lena, don't you?"

Geoff grinned, and I guessed what he was thinking. He knew it was very nice for his family, too. Lena was so generous, they would all benefit by this windfall.

"Well," Geoff went on, "Lena hadda go up of course and see the fambly lawyer. Her mother'll git half the money and Lena'll git the other half. After she pays the tax she'll have almost twenny-five hundred dollars. And d'ya know what she's gonna do with it? She's gonna spend it on the farm. Mum says she won't let her, but Lena says Mum jist can't stop her."

Geoff laughed joyously. "They had an argument about it, and ended up by kissing each other. Now Mum's so excited, she can't hardly sleep no more. You know how Mum loves the farm." Geoff's ringing laughter was so full of pure joy that Katy came out to join us and hear what it was all about.

He stayed an hour, talking almost constantly, and only pausing to catch his breath now and then. "William's sure an awful fool if he don't marry Lena right away. There'd be money left over and he could take up aviation. Then he'd be all ready when the war comes." I recalled how, in the beginning, Geoff had considered William's friendship with Lena a misfortune that would make it impossible for him to become an aviator. But Geoff, like all the Otters, had become devoted to Lena long before she came into money.

The Otters spent the next two days in a fever of impatience and curiosity, waiting for Lena and Mary and William to come home, "with all that money."

"We're rich now," Mickey told me, complacently. "Anyway, Lena is."

"It must be nice to be rich," I said.

"Lena's got twenny-five hunderd dollars," piped Molly.

"That's a helluva lotta money," said Mickey.

"We'll have a house as nice as yourn," boasted Dennis.

"No, we won't," said Mickey, loyally. "But *almost* as nice."

Half a dozen small Otters were sitting in a row on the moss-eaten verandah with Mrs. Otter in her rocker behind them. Old Corry, muttering to himself as he cleaned a mess of sunfish Geoff had caught in Aspen Pond, was the only denizen of the hilltop who saw no promise of joy in the money that had been dropped into Lena's lap.

Rolf tried to figure out, if Lena's money were all in pennies, how far the pennies would reach if placed side by side, but he soon gave up, and I, being no mathematician, couldn't help him.

"It is not a good thing for the poor to inherit wealth," said old Corry. "Sudden and abrupt changes, whether in one's condition of life, or even in one's physical surroundings, are unwise. The blessed Anthony said: 'Wheresoever you may be, haste not to leave that place for another.' He might have added: 'Haste not to change the condition of thy life, especially from that of poverty to riches.' This money, acquired through evil, should be allowed to remain where it is or it should be destroyed. No good will come of it. And the young people should have been compelled to remain at home, where they were happy and content. In fetching the money, they become partners with those who originally killed, cheated and defrauded to acquire it."

"Oh, Corry's talkin' through his hat again," cried Geoff, scornfully. "What do you think Lena is, crazy, to let all that money slip through her fingers?" Geoff had never forgiven old Corry for pitching the handful of coins into Otter Creek. He had spent hours digging for them in the muddy creek bottom, without luck.

The old man, having dropped his last cleaned sunfish into the

pail of water, got up and walked away with an injured air. "Now you hurt Corry's feelings, Geoff," said Walter. "Say something nice to him to make up for it."

"I will not," said Geoff. "If he kin afford to throw money in the krick, or pass up five thousand dollars, other people can't. And he shouldn't discourage 'em to."

For once Mrs. Otter didn't seem to hear old Corry's advice, or Geoff's scornful repudiation of it. She was gazing across the flat hilltop, mumbling to herself as if she, too, were demented like the old man whom she was keeping. Her enjoyment at the moment, I guessed, was a splendid vision of what Otter Hill could be like after a little money had been spent on it. From the way her eyes glowed, she must have been conjuring up something quite as magnificent as the model farm she'd seen at the Peeble Creek County Fair. And being an humble and a grateful woman, she probably reproached herself for the way she had received Lena at Otter Hill when the girl came there, an angel in disguise, ready to turn the haven to which she had been welcomed so shabbily into a heaven for them all.

Mrs. Otter asked me to stay, for she thought there was going to be a fine sunset. Sunsets were one of her rare indulgences; she hated to miss a good one. Mrs. Otter was not a fanciful woman, or given to extravagant dreams, but one day she told me she thought it would be lovely to own a pair of wings, and fly into the sunset. Her grandfather, her mother and her brother, she said, died in early evening when the sun was setting. Tonight, as she sat in her rocker, her hands quietly folded in her lap, her face was full of the peace that lay in the valley countryside below, and the added happiness of knowing that some of her hopes for Otter Hill were to be realized.

It had been a beautiful summer, so far. Just now the misty valley was almost solidly tinted with the orange of hawkweed, the yellow of daisies, the white of buckwheat bloom. There had been an almost uninterrupted parade of blue and golden days, with nighttime showers to keep the fields fresh and green, and to help

the crops. The white pond lilies in Aspen Pond had never been so lovely, or the birds enlivening the trees and shrubs so abundant. All the wealth and promise of such a summer seemed to glow in Mrs. Otter's candid eyes. The fireflies came out, and dropped specks of gold in the dark. The stars came out, too.

"There's Venus," Geoff was saying, dreamily, and then suddenly he jumped up and shouted, "There's Lena." Some of the sleepy Otters looked up into the sky, as if they expected to see Lena dangling from a constellation. The three travelers had parked the car below, and crept up Otter Hill in the dark to surprise the family on the verandah.

Mrs. Otter kissed Lena affectionately, and I was again glad they had become friends before Lena came into the money. The girl had brought gifts for the whole family and she distributed them at once. Everybody, except Mrs. Otter and Geoff, got what he wanted. Geoff received a hunting knife which his mother eyed with admiration and some covetousness. Later on, she exchanged the piece of linen she received from Lena, with so many protestations of delight, for the hunting knife which was such a fine thing to clean fish with. The linen, purchased by Lena as dress goods for Mrs. Otter, went on the raft Geoff sailed on Aspen Pond, where he caught the bass Mrs. Otter would clean with the hunting knife. I remember how delighted Jennie was—not so much with the miniature teacart and cups and saucers and teakettle Lena gave her, but with the box in which these toys came. Jennie loved boxes for their own sake, and collected them. Watching the scene with pleasure, I noticed a look of apprehension suddenly erase the smile in which Geoff's face was wreathed.

"Gee, Lena, have ya got any o' that money left?"

Lena laughed excitedly. "Don't worry, Geoff, I didn't spend it all on presents. Where's Corry? I've got something for him too."

"Oh, he's in the barn. But don't let's call him. If his eyes fall on your money the beetles start crawlin' 'round in his brain. You kin give him his present tomorrow. Now, let's see the money, Lena. You said you'd show it to us."

A warm flush lay on Lena's cheeks. Out of her purse which she turned upside down into her lap tumbled a pile of wealth—hundred, fifty, twenty and ten dollar bills. Truly, the sight of it stimulated almost to delirium the chronically hard-up Otters. All the children wanted to hold it—to know how it felt to hold so much money, besides just look at it. I almost pitied Lena's eagerness, her probable obsession that she had to buy her way into the family—that she was more welcome with money than without it.

Mr. Otter alone had felt badly about accepting help from the girl, in contrast to Mrs. Otter's eagerness. He had held out against Mrs. Otter in this, but she finally won him over. "Kids grow up, everybody work, we save money and pay you back, Lena," he said, huskily.

"Oh, yes, yes," cried Mrs. Otter, without too much conviction. "We pay back." Mrs. Otter was a wise woman, and she must have seen how happy Lena was in making her money a gift to them.

That money was put to work at once, and Otter Hill was rapidly bereft of its rustic, woodsy charm.

Mrs. Otter had spent hours planning what she would do with the place if she had the means. She would, naturally, think more about her barn than about her house. Timber bought secondhand was drawn to Otter Hill, and the boys brought bags of cement from the village, and gravel from near-by sand pits. Mr. Otter, William, and a man hired for the work tore down the old barn and put up a new one—put it up so quickly I could almost see it grow.

It couldn't grow fast enough for the Otters, however. They were in a perfect ferment to have everything done at once. Calvin alone refused to join in the activity and the rejoicing. He got himself a job on a neighboring farm and only came home week ends. Mrs. Otter pitched in and helped, working just like a man. None of the babies was ever in the way. The little boys fetched tools and carried water and pulled rusty nails out of old timbers, straightening them out to be used again. Some of the timbers from the old barn were put into the new, and others were sawed and split for kindling.

The roof of the new barn was laid over with a sheeting of tin, and the whole thing painted red trimmed with white.

"It's good enough to live in," said Geoff, enthusiastically.

"Then why not put the cows in the house, and let us all sleep in the barn," said Calvin, with a sarcastic laugh.

The barn off her mind, Mrs. Otter got after the house. The rotting, moss-eaten verandah was torn off the house and a new and larger one added, with a brick sidewalk, and a flight of red brick steps leading up to it. Water coming through the roof every time it rained was not a pleasant thing, even to a pioneer family like the Otters. A new roof was put on the house.

A cement floor was laid in the cellar and many repairs were made on the inside and outside of the dwelling. The floors were propped up and straightened out. Completely restored at last, and pronounced as sound as a silver dollar, the finishing touch it received was a dress of white paint and a trimming of green. Mrs. Otter fairly gloated over it, but of course its picturesque charm was gone with the vines and creepers that, clinging to it so lovingly, had been torn off to make way for the paint. Once the shack had been an integral part of the landscape, like the trees and big rocks, but now, clean and bare, it stood against the hilltop with such vehemence it seemed ready to fly away. It looked as uncomfortable as a dirty little boy who'd just been cleaned up against his will.

The hens had always roosted in the barn, spending their nights with Rosie, the cow. William built a new henhouse with a capacity for five hundred chickens. Mrs. Otter had always wanted to try her luck with turkeys, and soon a flock of gobblers made their debut at Otter Hill and seemed to like the dry, sandy soil. Six big fat geese followed them, and a gander which even Molly was afraid of. One morning four fat Guernsey cows were welcomed by the family like so much royalty and put into their separate stalls in the new barn.

A good barn, a fine house with a cement floor in the cellar, a herd, flocks—Mrs. Otter now had them all. This meant that she

had everything she wanted, and wouldn't have changed places with the Queen of England.

While Mrs. Otter gave the place its practical values, Lena and Mary and Jennie thought only of making it attractive. Lena planted flowers in painted tubs and boxes, and Geoff, Walter, and Alix helped her build a rock garden. They brought in small evergreen trees from the woods which they planted in little groups on the lawn and grounds. A lawn mower was introduced to the weedy patch the Otters called their front yard and the boys almost fought for the privilege of using that mechanical novelty. Give her a year or more, said Lena, and Otter Hill would be the neighborhood show place. She boasted that some day the Village Garden Society might include Otter Hill in its list of May Day tours.

Mrs. Otter was so grateful for everything, she decided it was time to give thanks to the Lord.

A mission was conducted by Catholic fathers in the little church near United Settlement, and every morning Mrs. Otter rose at four o'clock and walked two miles to attend the five o'clock Mass. She told me there was nothing so fresh and calm as the countryside at four in the morning, and heartily advised me to get up one day at that hour and find out for myself. The fathers holding the mission sold prayer books, rosaries, and holy pictures and other religious articles, and one day Mrs. Otter came home with a chalk statue of the Blessed Virgin over which I'm sure Our Lady Herself would have shuddered had she seen it.

Mrs. Otter brought blessed candles, too, and a bottle of holy water, every drop of which Molly had drunk half an hour after Mrs. Otter put it down on the kitchen table. She became frightened and wept when she learned that the water was holy water, and that her insides were now blessed. Mickey refilled the bottle from the well, and the children agreed not to tell their mother.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

The Pillar of Fire

*L*ightning played in the storm clouds the wind was driving across the sky over Otter Hill, and the Otter family was trying hard not to be blown away.

The high winds had the ring of annihilation in them, and Mrs. Otter was anxiously trotting around in her bare feet, propitiating the heavens by sprinkling what she thought was holy water on the verandah, and lighting blessed candles (designed, evidently, to act as spiritual lightning rods) to place in the windows.

Some of the window panes were already broken, so the candles went out, and as I came up the hill, Mickey told me that since it wasn't really holy water that Mrs. Otter had sprinkled around it wouldn't do any good. "And even if it was," added the heathen Mickey, "it wouldn't do no good anyway."

The children were exhilarated by the storm. The stiff wind rolled the babies all over the lawn. It scattered the little girls as if they were a flock of hens, lifting their dresses and plainly showing they had nothing on underneath. Rolf said he thought the end of the world was coming—a situation he plainly found engaging. The wash line, hanging with Mrs. Otter's laundry that only nearly approximated cleanliness, went flying across the barnyard and finally became tangled in the thorn-apple tree. The sky turned black and it seemed to skim the hilltop, the air became wonderfully fresh and cool. The forests in the valley roared, and the tree tops in a mass moved slowly back and forth, like wind-waves in a grain field.

"Gee, this is gonna be a humdinger," shouted Rolf, his voice sounding miles away. I wanted to get home before the rain fell, and the wind all but picked me up and carried me away. Katy was terribly afraid of lightning storms. I fully expected to find her under the bed, but after I had been blown home, I found her flying around the house closing windows.

The storm reached its greatest velocity at noon. The two red maples on our lawn were uprooted in a twinkling of the eye. Every pane of glass on the north side of our house crashed through. Now that a storm was actually striking at us, Katy remained remarkably calm. As we were mopping up the torrents of water that came in through the broken windows, I found myself worrying not so much about ourselves as about the big family on its hilltop home. They were so much more exposed to the storm than we were.

The darkness was unearthly. Great forks of lightning were followed by frightful explosions. Down the road a way I saw a ball of fire explode and fairly shatter a tall sugar maple tree. The rain, coming down in the thickest sheets I had ever seen, made a deluge in front of our house, and small trees and big branches were flying through the air like huge bats. Our flower garden was beaten down and entirely destroyed in half an hour. Katy and I had to be in a dozen places at once, to protect rugs and furniture from the floods that poured into the house. The storm lasted two hours, then the skies cleared almost immediately. A recalcitrant sun came out, smiling broadly.

I tried to go outside, to take stock of the damage on our grounds, but I couldn't open the front door, because a tree had crashed against it. It was sad to see our ravished garden and the damage that had been done to the trees and shrubs. I quickly forgot all about that, however, when I saw a thick column of smoke curl over Otter Hill.

At any moment, during the storm, I had expected to see the gale lift up the shack and send it flying away, like a big airship, with Mrs. Otter and her brood inside. As I climbed up the hill old Corry, drenched to the skin, came hurrying to meet me. "Fire and death have struck," cried the old man, the tears running down his cheeks. "The barn, which poor Mrs. Otter prized above her dwelling, is in ruins. The cattle are all dead." I took the trembling old man by the arm and led him up the hillside. No—the house hadn't been torn from the landscape, but the wind had ripped off the new roof

and scattered it in pieces over the hillside. A huge tomahawk couldn't have done a neater job.

Beyond that I was to discover the thing which, as old Corry had suggested, was even worse; the smoke rising in thick columns from the remains of the barn. The Otters had been through a blitzkrieg, and they were white and shaken.

They were scattered all over the hilltop. The drenched babies had already cried their eyes out. The soaking little boys were just getting over their fright. Little Jennie looked bewildered and heart-broken. It was only Molly, that born adventuress, who seemed untouched by the tragedy. Although she tried to act as if she, too, should have been in tears, or just over them, I could tell she was not really worried over the prospect of living in a house without a roof on it. The rain—a regular cloudburst of it—had drenched, not only the Otters, but all their possessions, and the big boys, looking very grim, were placing clothes and bedding and furniture on the lawn to dry in the sun that had come out to smile so tardily. But it was the barn that made the Otters look so tragic—the new barn Mrs. Otter had acquired, after such a long dreaming.

Her face white and pitiful, she walked around shaking her head as she took stock of the frightful damage.

“Worst storm me see in over twenty year,” she said, sadly.

“Worst storm I ever seen in my life,” said Mickey.

Geoff's eyes were full of tears. “All the new cows got killed,” he told me.

The henhouse, which had adjoined the barn, was also in ruins. It had gone up more quickly than the barn, and all that was left was a charred heap of debris containing roasted goose, turkey, and chicken the Otters would never eat a sliver of. True to an old habit of hers, Rosie, the cow had wandered off that morning after milking and when the storm came up, had taken refuge under a big pine tree. Walter came leading her up the hill and she was received with tears of gladness by the family. At least, Rosie had been spared!

“I can't understand how the barn went up so quickly, when it

was raining so hard," said Walter. He was arranging his books on a rock to dry out. They were all wet and quite spoiled and I could see that the boy felt miserable about them.

"The hay caught on fire," said Geoff. "The inside burnt out and then the framework fell in. And we jist sent for a lightnin' rod yesterday and the barn wasn't insured!"

William and Calvin wasted no time in idle regrets. Their mouths set tight, they went on cleaning away debris, and I pitched in to help them. I wished it had been our barn that had been struck. I was about to offer it to Mrs. Otter but caught myself in time. The Otters had no need for another barn; their flock was gone.

Mr. Otter had been in the village during the storm and I shall never forget the look on his face when he came up the hill and saw the devastation. He made no comment at all, but just sat down on the chopping block and stared. Mrs. Otter, giving him a brave smile, slipped her arm around his waist.

In a few minutes he got up to help straighten things out. The Otters, as they worked, avoided one another's eyes. I heard Rolf whisper to Mickey that it was Molly's fault that lightning had struck; if it had been real holy water Mrs. Otter had sprinkled on the verandah, they would have been protected. Mickey told Rolf he was a little crazy, like old Corry.

Old Corry commenced to show signs of acute illness. He was breathing as fast as a kitten and making spasmodic gestures with his hands. He tried to talk, but only uncouth noises came out of his mouth. His eyes rolled. "The beetle, the beetle, Mum," cried Mickey. "It's gettin' ready ta crawl round in Corry's brain. I kin tell. That's the way he acts." Old Corry collapsed on the ground, the big boys picked him up and put him on the sofa which had been carried out of doors to dry. Mr. Otter held the old man firmly but gently and the family looked with their anguished eyes from old Corry to the roofless house to the charred remains of the barn. Everywhere they had been struck.

But perhaps the unhappiest one of them all was Lena.

Her face was drained of every vestige of color and she was

wringing her hands. "Oh," she moaned, "this is terrible. Mrs. Otter loved the barn so much, she wanted to sleep in it. I wish she had now, instead of me."

Lena looked around to make sure nobody was in hearing. "Do you know," she said, almost whispering, "that on hot nights Mary and I used to make beds in the hayloft. The hay smelled so sweet and when it rained, the sound of the raindrops on the roof was so lovely and soothing. I loved it. But when I got up this morning I left my purse in the barn, on one of the rafters where I thought it would be safe. It had all my money in it."

Lena's tears poured freely. When she was able to talk, she continued: "The money burnt up with the barn. Over two thousand dollars." She looked at me out of eyes full of anguish and incredulity. "And none of this stuff is paid for yet. I settled with the carpenter for his time, that's all. I still owe nine hundred dollars for the timber and material that went into the barn, the new roof on the house, the cement floor, and the cows and the fowl. Oh, what am I going to do?"

Some coherent words were struggling through old Corry's lips. "See how the smoke from the barn hugs the ground, as it did from Cain's unworthy sacrifice to the Lord!"

Indeed, a deep smudge, a black cloud rolled along the earth, and could not seem to lift.

"How is it?" muttered the old man, "that the Lord permitted Rosie to escape and destroyed the new herd? Is it because Rosie was come by honestly?"

"Listen to him," said Lena. "Like everything he says, it seems to have a grain of sense in it."

"Well, Lena," I joked, "if Molly hadn't drunk up the bottle of holy water—"

But Lena couldn't smile and didn't want to hear jokes. "Something else happened because of me," she mourned. "It happened last night, in the barn. Between William and Calvin. They had a fight. They rolled over on the floor, punching and hitting each other. If Mrs. Otter had seen them it would have broken her heart.

If she'd known they were fighting because of me I'll bet she'd have sent me away flying. Calvin told William he knew all about me, that I was no good, that I was only buying my way into a respectable family. He said if I stayed much longer he'd clear out. I don't know—" Lena's voice trailed off in an anguish of silence.

"Don't tear yourself apart like this, Lena."

"I spoke to William after the fight," she sobbed, "and he said that Calvin and he had just been having a little wrestling match and that Calvin got a little rough, that was all. But I think he realized I knew what it was all about. And now he's sad, too."

Mrs. Otter came up, and lay a comforting hand on Lena's shoulder. And, even if a dream of many years had just been swept away, Mrs. Otter found a thought for Katy and myself. "Storm do plenty of damage, eh?" she said, adding anxiously, "Your house all right? Me see two red trees fall down in front."

"Only a few broken windows and some rainwater in the house," I told her. I thought it too bad the storm hadn't distributed its havoc a little more evenly.

I took half a dozen little Otters home with me. Poor things, it was such an adventure for them to spend a night in somebody else's house, even if it was because their own had been wrecked. We crammed them with as much creamed chicken, ice cream and cake as they could hold, gave them all two pieces of candy and put them to bed.

"I told you this is no longer a scarlet house," said Katy, later in the evening while she rearranged covers on the sleeping children. "Even the red maples have gone to prove it."

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Mr. Otter's Temporal Welfare

Short-legged, golden-haired Mickey Otter reminded me of a plump yellow duck trying to go fast. He was always pumping those two fat legs of his double time. One afternoon a few days later he came waddling and puffing up our driveway, locomoting with such difficulty that I thought it a pity he couldn't swim over like the fowl he resembled. I shouldn't have been surprised to hear him greet me with an anxious quack! quack!

"Pa's awful sick," he said. "He fell in the ditch, and Ma thinks he had a heart attacked. She wants ya ta come right over. He don't answer us when we talk ta him and Ma's 'fraid he's gonna die if we can't git the doctor."

Although he spoke worriedly, I could tell the possibility that Mr. Otter might die had never entered Mickey's head, and he went on, "The doctor'll cost us three dollars, and that's lotsa money. O' course," Mickey added, magnanimously, "it ain't Pa's fault if he had a heart attacked."

In the kitchen at Otter Hill Mrs. Otter was drying her cheeks on her apron. The steam in Molly's calliope was going full blast, and a cluster of frightened babies was huddled behind the stove, with Fluffy anxiously licking away the tears that streaked down their faces. Still another cluster was gathered around Mr. Otter who, dressed in his khaki workshirt, burlap trousers and high shoes, was lying on the couch, looking deathly ill, his hands folded on his chest in a very laid-out manner.

It was the first time I had seen Mrs. Otter so terribly frightened, or Mr. Otter when he wasn't feeling "fine, fine." I took Mr. Otter's pulse and pronounced it normal, but Mrs. Otter said piteously: "My Florian never sick like this before. No can walk, no can talk, no can stand up. Have so much trouble, house get damaged, barn burn up, he have heart attacked." When Mrs. Otter called

her husband "Florian" instead of "Papa" the situation was very serious.

Geoff was fairly shaking with fright and grief. "I was lookin' outa the window, and seen Pa come down the road. Alluva sudden, I seen him make a swan dive in the ditch, jist like it was a feather-bed. Good thing I seen 'em, or he mighta stayed there all night. It took the hull bunch of us to git him up here. Oh, if only William or Calvin was home!"

"And what could the big boys do?" muttered old Corry, from his seat in the window. "It is only to be hoped, that as the result of introducing money exchanged for blood into this house, that we are not called upon to suffer more than we can bear."

Nobody paid any attention to the old man. "Please get priest for my Florian," Mrs. Otter beseeched me. "Me no want him to die, with mortal sin on soul. Last Sunday he stay home from church, and make chokecherry wine. Go to hell for sure if he die with mortal sin on soul."

"Oh, gee, Mum," cried Geoff. "Why don't cha send for the doctor first? Pa's body's more important than his soul, ain't it?"

"Blasphemy, blasphemy," groaned old Corry. "I can not be of help to my kind host, nor can I endure the increasingly free tongue of the youngster. I must go."

"Good riddance," said Geoff, after the old man had shuffled out. "Let him go sommers and find his beetle. Or else," added Geoff, desperately, "let him go down by the krick and throw some more money in."

Of course any boy's first concern would be the temporal rather than the spiritual welfare of his father. "I'll get the priest *and* the doctor," I said, offering to take some of the children along, to divert them and get them out of Mrs. Otter's kitchen. But Mrs. Otter for once seemed reluctant to have them go. I really believed she wanted her Florian to be surrounded by all his family if he died.

I was sure Mr. Otter hadn't had a heart attack but I drove as fast as I could. Dr. Barney was out, and I left word at his office.

A few minutes later I found Father Justin inspecting a fresco in the vestibule of the new church he was building in the village. He tried to find his assistant pastor, without success, and at length decided to make the sick call himself.

"I am behind in my work," he said, stepping into my car after stopping in the old church across the street, to secure the Holy Viaticum. "Yesterday, while a painting of the Madonna was being installed over the high altar, a scaffolding fell with three workmen on it, and one of them may die of a broken neck." Father Justin paused for a moment, then looked at me and said meditatively: "But what a privilege, after all, to break one's neck in the service of the Holy Church! It is a fate only slightly less glorious than martyrdom. I have promised this workman that if he dies, the first Requiem Mass read in the new church will be for the benefit of his soul."

"I hope he feels consoled, Father," I said, feebly.

Father Justin greeted the Otters in the name of the Sacred Heart of Jesus. Back in the kitchen I found that a change, hardly discernible, had come over them all. The babies had stopped crying, and were quietly playing in a corner of the room with wooden blocks, which William had cut out and painted for them.

There was a secret, contained look on Molly's face. She watched me slyly. Even the babies seemed mysterious. The other children had regained their composure, and Mrs. Otter seemed not so much frightened now as nervous. No doubt Mr. Otter was feeling better, and she felt chagrined for having chased Father Justin all the way out to Otter Hill. Mr. Otter lay propped up on the couch, his face slightly distorted, but he was conscious now, and he smiled at us wanly. Father Justin took one look around the denlike kitchen, glanced at the ceiling which was a piece of canvas to take place of the roof that had been blown off, and then crossing over to Mr. Otter, he said solicitously: "Are you in pain, my good man?"

"We think he's got somethin' ketchin', Father, so don't go too clost to him," said Geoff, and Mrs. Otter, who once told me she did not believe in germs, shook her head in vigorous affirmation.

With a courteous gesture, she took the priest by the arm, and put him in a rocker some feet away from the couch on which Mr. Otter lay. Mr. Otter groaned, a healthy enough groan, and rolled his eyes. "Feel like angel and devil, they make monkey business in my stomach."

Father Justin spoke gravely. "Do you wish to make your confession now? It may be possible to exorcise the devil of which you speak."

"Oh, no, no, no," groaned Mr. Otter, "I cannot think about my sins now, my head she is too weak, it does not work good. Some other day, please, when I feel better."

Father Justin looked at the patient reflectively. "He seems too upset to make his confession, yet he is not ill enough for the Extreme Unction. In that case, I should hurry back to my church. I am greatly behind in my work."

Mrs. Otter spoke apologetically: "Yes, Florian feel better, no need Sacrament. Besides, me no got bread in house, no got holy water, blessed candle. Molly drink up bottle."

Father Justin glanced around the room. Calvin and Lena were not present, but William had come home, and he was sitting in a corner with Co-coo in his lap. Like everybody who came here, I could tell that Father Justin was charmed by the sight of Mrs. Otter's handsome boys, her pretty girls, and her fat, golden babies. For all the rags they wore, the yellow-haired children, with their faces newly scrubbed for the benefit of the clergy, looked like little Viking nobility. Father Justin's eyes softened, and I think for once he forgot about his church—but William soon reminded him of it.

"What style is your church, Father?" he asked. "I can't tell by looking at it from the outside."

The Otters were all watching and listening so closely I got the impression that they were biding time. Father Justin's face lit up beautifully and he gave William a look of respect. When he spoke now, his voice sounded like a bell. "It is thirteenth century Gothic, a style at once exquisite, dignified, and scholarly. It makes them who say the Gothic is a dead style look very foolish. I myself

would have preferred to build a church of the less-known Lombard style, which is one of purity and great charm, and I know an architect in England subtle enough to handle its elusiveness perfectly. But I had no voice in making the selection."

Mrs. Otter kept smiling and nodding, as if she understood every word of this learned architectural discourse. Certainly she wished the priest to go right on talking, even if it was over her head.

"When is it gonna be finished, Father?" asked Geoff, with the air of one trying to keep the conversation going.

"Happily, the plans call for its completion in May, which is the month of Mary," replied Father Justin, softly. "At a solemn High Mass, his grace will dedicate the church to our Blessed Mother. God willing, you will all yourself be present at that Mass, including this sick man here."

"Me like to go," said Mrs. Otter, softly. "Me wish me could have window in new church, for my Leftie, my Johnnie, my Joey, and my little Elsie. Johnnie and Joey, they make wild Indian in field, with weed over head. No rain for long time, everything dry. Play with matches, make campfire, field ketch fire, they burn. Die in two hours." There was a plaintive note in Mrs. Otter's voice.

"Elsie fell in the rosebush," piped Molly, from her spot in a corner. "After we pulled her out, she run down cellar and locked the door. Elsie was my twin."

"My Leftie," Mrs. Otter went on sweetly, "he peddle newspaper, save up pennies, buy new bicycle. Truck come along, smash bicycle, break Leftie in back. Take him long time to die. Ah, me!"

"Five stained-glass windows have just been installed in the church," said Father Justin, softly. "The Annunciation, The Adoration of the Magi, The Crucifixion, The Angel at the Tomb, and The Resurrection. But Madam," he cried, as if he had just heard, "if you cannot donate an entire church window, you may be able to make a contribution towards one, however small, and then the names of your dead children will be written on a piece of parchment, and placed under glass in the vestibule for everyone to see and read."

Mrs. Otter, looking joyful, quickly crossed over to the cupboard. While Geoff watched with eyes I could tell highly disapproved of a spending that brought in no tangible return, she took a quarter, two dimes and a nickel from the cracked cup that contained the Otter wealth, and put them in Father Justin's hand. He seemed reluctant to accept the coins, and I guessed he was sorry he had spoken at all. But after a moment he brightened and said: "Who knows this contribution which you have made in the names of your children, may be the blessed means of transferring their souls from the fires of purgatory to the eternal joys of heaven!"

The children listened solemnly, and Mrs. Otter's face glowed. I believe she actually enjoyed a vision of her four children being carried by an angel from purgatory into heaven. "Leftie's been dead for 'bout fifteen years," Geoff whispered to me, a little indignantly, "too bad if he hadda burn in purgatory all that time before he went to heaven." The ambitious Mickey then spoke up:

"If I was a priest, I'd likta git elected bishop. The bishop rides 'round in a big Pierce-Arrow, and he's got a chauffeur, too. Wears a dark blue uniform with gold buttons jist like an admiral."

Father Justin gave the little boy a kindly smile. "We cannot all be bishops, but some of us may aspire to be chauffeurs," he said. "Ah, yesterday," he went on, turning to William, "his grace, accompanied by monsignor the director-general of the diocese, inspected my work, and they were delighted with what they saw. His grace complimented me very highly. He seemed especially pleased with the sacristy accommodations. He said to me: 'Father, I am happy to find herein provided a priest's sacristy, a sacristy for the acolytes, and a sacristy where flowers and vestments may be prepared. Now, when I come here on Confirmation Day, I shall be able to robe and disrobe in all privacy.' His grace, you know, is extremely modest."

"I altar boy, in old country," muttered Mr. Otter, darkly. "Old Father tell me to study for priest, and make me learn Latin. Now I have wife with sixteen children."

"Gee, I'm glad you didn't study for priest, Pa, or I wouldn't be borned, would I?" said Mickey.

Father Justin, full of his church, and inspired by a receptive audience, went on: "You must realize the task of designing a church varies greatly from any other which faces the architect. A church must live and breathe. Every line must be designed to lead to the high altar, which is the true climax of the church; indeed, the only reason for its existence. The altar is the head and face of the church, and the head must not be out of proportion to the body."

"Oh, yes, sure," said Mrs. Otter, as if in all this her own deep convictions found confirmation.

Father Justin remained in the kitchen two hours, speaking about his church almost constantly. Mr. Otter woke and dozed by turns, and so did the babies, but Mrs. Otter and William and his brothers listened to the priest with flattering attention. Although it was a lovely day, none of the children was tempted to go outside. While Father Justin sat in their kitchen, they must attend him. Finally, Mr. Otter shook himself, sat up and said in a lugubrious voice: "Maybe Father like a drink of cider. Make good talk about church, just like prayer book. Wet whistle for him."

The Otters looked shocked, but Father Justin, acting as if he had not heard, rose and blessed the patient, shook hands with everybody and promised to come again. We stood on the verandah chatting with Mrs. Otter when Dr. Barney (who had brought at least half a dozen Otters into the world) drove up the hill with Lena at his side. He had met her on the road. Dr. Barney looked very gay, for an old man.

When Lena saw Father Justin, she flushed crimson and then turned pale. Father Justin, for his part, seemed astonished by her presence at Otter Hill—he looked as though he couldn't believe his eyes. She slipped away without greeting him. But Dr. Barney shook the priest's hand vigorously and offered to give him a lift back to the village if he could wait a little while. Father Justin then turned to Mrs. Otter, remarking, with dismay, on Lena's presence at

Otter Hill—and Mrs. Otter only shook her head in perplexity. Lena sneaked upstairs the back way.

In the kitchen, Dr. Barney opened his bag and at once proceeded to examine the patient, but Mrs. Otter, who, I suspected, was unwilling to pay out three dollars for a sick call, refused to give him time to make the diagnosis, which she pronounced herself:

"Papa not sick. Papa just drunk, that all."

Dr. Barney did not seemed displeased. "Papa ketch ride home from work with boss," Mrs. Otter explained. "See hull case of whiskey drop off truck on road. Pick him up, sample him good. Papa not used to whiskey. First get drunk, then get big cramp in stomach. Me think he have heart attacked, send for priest. Me no want tell priest Papa drunk—that big disgrace in fambly. Disgrace enough, when Calvin work for old fadder, and old fadder say he—"

The children, who were all listening intently, waited for Mrs. Otter to finish the sentence, but she caught herself in time. This was slightly misplaced caution, for even little Molly knew that Calvin had been discharged from the priest's employ for "getting in trouble with a bad girl."

"Did you send for Father Justin before you sent for me?" asked Dr. Barney, gruffly.

"Oh, no, we sent for you first," said Geoff. "After all, the body's more important than the soul, ain't it?"

Dr. Barney's eyes twinkled. Geoff was a great favorite with him. "Well, I'd rather find your dad drunk than dying, any old day. I don't know about Father Justin, though."

"Father Justin's a very good man, doctor," said William, gravely.

Mrs. Otter squeezed Mr. Otter's hand. "Poor Papa," she said. "Devil and angel stop fighting in belly?"

"I think devil win," said Mr. Otter, meekly.

"Cheer up, Pa," said Mickey. "You'll be as good as new tomorrow."

After Dr. Barney had given Mr. Otter some medicine, Mrs. Otter fetched the big brown jug and poured the doctor a good drink of cider. Before he left, he produced a half dollar which he told Geoff

to put in his bank. Then, looking extremely affable, and without mentioning a fee, he said good-by to the family and went out. Geoff stood on a chair and reached for the cracked china cup up in the cupboard, dropped the coin into it and said: "There, Mum, we're even again. Except for Pa's stommick maybe."

"Yes, even again," said Mrs. Otter sweetly. She looked happy. Mr. Otter was going to be all right and there were her thoughts to enjoy—thoughts about the big stained-glass window in Father Justin's church, and the parchment under glass in the vestibule with the names of her four dead children written on it, for everybody to see and read.

I found an almost hysterical Lena waiting for me on the roadside, at the foot of Otter Hill. She had come down the back way, she told me, so nobody could see her; and she had hidden a traveling bag in the bushes near by. She was ready for flight. "Yes, I'm going," she half sobbed.

Of course, I had guessed Lena's secret.

"Don't, Lena," I said. "It won't make any difference to Mrs. Otter. Now that they've all learned to love you—"

Lena wouldn't listen. "I deceived you, too," she said, darkly. "I might have told you the truth, at least. I was the girl Father Justin found Calvin with that night in the lane near his house. The girl he said was the worst girl who had ever visited the village. And he's right."

"Now, Lena—"

"Father Justin often visited a parish priest up in Watertown and he knew my family. He knew people whispered that Papa had killed men when he was on the river, and he knew what they whispered about Mamma—and how I was bound to be just like her some day. Well, maybe they're right," finished Lena recklessly.

"Don't talk that way, Lena."

She paid no attention. "Last spring, I came down to the village and saw Calvin at a dance. Do you remember I told you how nice William had been to me? Well, Calvin was nice to me too—treated

me just like a perfectly respectable girl—and I said to myself: 'I'm going after that boy for fair. I didn't know there were any boys like that.' It wasn't hard to make Calvin like me," Lena went on. "We generally met in the lane near the priest's house and that's where he caught us that night. Whatever might have happened was mostly my fault, I guess. After Calvin ran away, I determined to go and find him. I was looking for him, just like William was, when I met William up in Watertown, and I threw myself at William just like I had thrown myself at Calvin. But William fell in love with me and I fell in love with him. He was more serious than Calvin."

Lena sighed and went on: "I like serious, sober men—I'd met so many playboys and drunks and silly old fools through Mamma. But of course, I was afraid to tell William that I'd known Calvin, and that it was because of me Calvin had lost his job with Father Justin. I just figured, when I made William bring me here, that I'd be able to win Calvin over—and keep him from telling on me. Well, he didn't tell on me, didn't let the family know who I was, but I couldn't win him over again, and I don't blame him. It took crust for me to come to Otter Hill. When Father Justin recognized me this afternoon, I hid on the side of the house and I heard him tell Mrs. Otter I had no business here, and that I wasn't fit company for the children. I don't know what she thinks of me now, and I'm not going to wait and find out. I really can't face it, together with what they'll all feel when they learn I let my purse burn up in the fire and that I can't pay for the barn, the new roof, and the cows—" Lena's voice trailed off in a sob.

"Nonsense, Lena. You'll find that—"

But Lena wouldn't let me get in a word. "Mrs. Otter thought I was bad enough when I first came and now that she knows about me and is going to find out that I can't pay for what I made her buy, what's she going to think? And if somebody doesn't pay for all that stuff—even if it's all gone now, she'll lose her home. It's up to me. I'm going north—and see if I can earn, beg, borrow or steal some money. I'll send it to Mrs. Otter if it's the last thing

I ever do and even if it means I can never come back here. I left a note for William in his room, telling him everything. I hadn't the courage to tell him to his face."

"Let me drive you to the village, anyway, if you must go, Lena," I said, hoping to hold her some way.

"No, no," she said, drying her eyes, and opening her bag to apply lipstick to her mouth. "Here comes a ride now. Watch me get it. You've never seen me in action." Lena pumped my hand and turned away. She couldn't wait until she got out of sight of Otter Hill; I believe she feared somebody would come running down to stop her.

There seemed to be only one other way of holding Lena, and I decided to use it. "Lena, please don't go. Come and stay with Katy and me, at least until you've thought things over. Red Maples is your home, you know, in a way. You used to live there when you were a little girl."

Lena stared at me a long time, then collapsed on her suitcase. "That house—Mamma—when I was a little girl—" her voice came in whispers.

"Yes, you used to live in Red Maples when you were a little girl. Katy found a doll up in the attic that must have been yours; we want to give it to you. And here comes old Corry down the road to keep you from going, Lena. He used to live in Red Maples, too. Can you guess who he is? He's your grandpa. Your mother probably told you he was dead."

"So I've got a grandpa," said Lena. "And I almost had a nice big family. But it's too late." Lena got up, a little unsteadily. "Here's my ride."

Then, on the spot, Lena seemed to put on a mask. Suddenly, she stopped being like the girl she had turned into since she came to Otter Hill. She looked at me hard—looked at me as if I were a stranger. "Be nice to that harmless old man," she said. "And see that everybody else is. I'll pay you, too."

Lena flung a wild, provocative smile at the truck driver that made him jam on the brakes. It was the kind of a smile that would

have stopped a thousand trucks. The beefy, unshaved fellow looked stunned at the spectacle of a beauty like Lena in the roadside, then fatuously delighted when he realized she wished to be his passenger. He jumped off the seat and took her bag and helped her get in. Lena did not look at me again as I stood by, watching her go. But I heard her laugh boisterously as the truck rumbled down the dirt road. . . .

I sat down on a big rock waiting for Corry to come up. But he did not stop when I called to him. What he strangely did, or what he seemed to do, was hiss at me. His eyes were dilated with something—was it fear, was it hate?—as they met mine. Breathing heavily, groaning a little, he passed me by and disappeared in the woody path. I went home wondering what was wrong with the old man. Nearly everyone seemed to be ailing, one way or another, that day.

Katy was ailing, too. "Corry left here a little while ago," she cried. "And in what a state! I met him on the road in all the heat and he asked if he could stop for some water. It's so cool in the house I thought it would do the old fellow good if he sat down for a while and I gave him a glass of something cold. While I was in the kitchen, I heard a series of horrible exclamations and when I returned—there was Corry in our little sitting room."

Katy looked at me guiltily. "Can you guess?" she said.

"He recognized the room, I suppose."

"Yes, he knew where he was at last. He recognized the pictures, and the divan, and the mirrors—I could tell he recognized everything. You know, the room's exactly as it was when he lived here."

"What did he do?" I said.

"He began to shout 'sin' and 'damnation,' and then he rushed out of the house. He shrunk away from me. I actually believe he took me for—for one of the girls Red's mother used to keep here," said Katy, not looking at all displeased.

"Well, there's been more than one denouement hereabouts to-day, Katy," I said. "Father Justin recognized Lena this afternoon.

She's the girl Calvin got mixed up with when he was living at the priest's house. Lena's the girl we've always called Red."

CHAPTER TWENTY

The Money Trees

"*P*oor girl, she feel so bad, she go away," said Mrs. Otter, sadly. "But she don't have to do that. Maybe me make William look for her, bring her home. Her money all burn up, so she need somebody now."

In spite of all the worries they had to divert them, the Otters spent a good deal of time mourning for Lena.

"Do you s'pose Lena an' Corry went away together?" asked Mickey.

"Is Corry gone too?" I asked.

"Yes, we ain't seen 'em 'round here since the day Lena left," said Geoff. "And I say good riddance. But he'll show up. He'll trot around the countryside till he's good and hungry."

"Lena one fine girl," said Mr. Otter, gravely. "She crazy about William, so she will come back. I am not afraid." Mr. Otter picked up his hammer and straightened out another nail to be used again.

The house was still roofless, except for the canvas over the kitchen, but Mr. Otter had been able to make repairs here and there. Fortunately the weather since the storm had been clear and sunny, and the Otters were hoping it would last until they could buy more lumber for a roof.

A roofless house was not an impossible thing to live in as long as the sun shone—the Otters, of course, were above such petty annoyances as flies, mosquitoes and wasps. "Cost plenty to fix up roof," said Mrs. Otter. Turning to Geoff she made one of her rare jokes. "Geoff, you lend me hundred dollar?"

Geoff appreciated the joke. He had the knack of picking up a bit of change here and there, and managing to hang on to it. He often played family banker, and Mrs. Otter frequently called upon him for loans, sometimes as high as fifty cents which, with an extra penny or two for interest, she usually repaid in queenly fashion. But now, when he picked up the little red iron pig that was his savings bank and shook it, not a sound could be heard. "Except for them big words he kin sprout, it's as empty as old Corry's head," said Geoff, rather bitterly.

"You fill her up again pretty soon," said Mrs. Otter, who had regained all her old serenity.

"What'll we do, Mum, if we can't git the house fixed up?" asked Mickey. "Lumber's awful expensive. The snow'll come right in, and we can't sleep in snow, kin we? We ain't no Eskimos."

"We ain't no Polar bears, either," said Rolf.

Mrs. Otter put her finger to her mouth and silenced the boys. She didn't want the babies to be frightened. "Never mind," she said, in comforting tones. "Me fix up house, all right."

"One hundred dollars," said Geoff, longingly. He was sitting on the chopping block and looking up into the thorn-apple tree, probably imagining that dollar bills, instead of leaves, were dangling from the twigs.

Dennis evidently believed that when Lena's money was burnt, all terrestrial wealth had been dissipated. "Why, I don't believe there's a hundred dollars left in the world," he cried.

"Gee, if only money grew on trees," said Geoff.

"Perhaps it does, Geoff," I said.

"Well, anyway, there ain't no money trees growin' 'round here," he said scornfully. "At least, I ain't never seen one." Geoff was in no mood for nonsense and he eyed me rather coldly.

I tossed aside my cigarette, and a cluster of young Otters at once contended for the privilege of putting it out, each with his bare foot.

"Geoff," I said. "You know those four big cherry trees at the foot of the hill?"

"Sure," he said. "A robin's nest is in one of 'em, with five eggs in it. Kind of late in the season for her to be having a fambly."

Mrs. Otter had been listening indulgently and now she smiled at me and said: "Better have fambly late, than not have fambly at all." Then I told her about the talk I had had with the County Surveyor a few days ago, following an automobile accident which had taken place at the foot of Otter Hill. The curve in the dirt road where it hugged the base of the hillside had to be widened, and the county was prepared to pay twenty-five dollars for each tree, above a certain size, that would have to come down. If the Otters objected to losing the cherries, which were growing on their land, and stood in the way of the proposed road bed, the road could be built up on the other side. In either case, it was estimated, the cost to the county would be about the same. By calling at the treasurer's office in the village, and signing a paper, the money could be secured within a few days.

Geoff leaped to his feet, with the sparkle in his eyes that only money could put there. "No kiddin', Curley," he shouted joyfully. "I only wisht we had a hundred trees they want to cut down. That would make twenny-five hundred dollars, just like Lena had."

"You can keep the wood from the trees and use it for fuel," I said.

The boys commenced to express their delight in many ways, mostly gymnastic, but Mrs. Otter, that monumentally calm woman, did not seem unduly elated. She thanked me for the good news and said: "Help keep me warm this winter, by golly. Eight cord of wood in four trees anyway."

"Besides that, you might be able to get your plush coat, Mum," said William. "That'll keep you warm too, and you'll look very nice in it when you go to church."

Mrs. Otter dreaded only one thing in the world, and that was the winter. She spent the other three seasons laying up against it. The plush coat was one she'd seen a picture of in a mail-order house catalogue and had admired for years. Mr. Otter and the boys had always wanted her to get it.

"We'll have a little money left over after buyin' lumber for a new roof," said Geoff, contentedly.

Young Calvin sat on the chopping block scratching his head of thick, wavy hair. Even when he worked in the woods, cutting timber, not one hair of that head ever got out of place. "Maybe you kin git a bottle of shampoo and git rid o' that dandruff, Calvin," suggested Geoff, charitably.

"I haven't got any dandruff," said Calvin, catching my eye and smiling. "That's only chaff from a threshing machine."

It was touching to hear the Otters' plans for the hundred dollars, after having had all of twenty-five hundred to do with. I thought it remarkable how quickly they'd come down to earth and seemed as contented as ever.

Mickey showed me four rusty nails pinning his trousers to his shirt. "I'd git me a package o' safety pins from the five-and-ten, and wouldn't let nobody else take any," he said, stoutly. Mickey's pants nearly drove him crazy. They were always falling down, sometimes right in the middle of the road. "It's a helluva note," he added, "when you gotta *nail* up your pants. Nails wasn't meant for clothes in the first place."

So many of the things Lena had given the Otters had been spoiled by the rain in the storm that wrecked their dwelling. "I'd git me a toothbrush that nobody else would dasta use 'cept Rolf," said Rosie, his loyal twin.

"And what do *you* want?" I asked Davy and Dennis.

"Oh, we wanna see Mickey Mouse," they chorused. Lena had promised to take the twins to see that celluloid celebrity and they were grieved over the lost prospect. I promised toothbrushes to both Rosie and Rolf, and the twins were to see not only Mickey Mouse, but Donald Duck as well, and they were well pleased.

Mr. Otter had excused himself shortly after I arrived and driven away to the village, and now he rattled up the hill in the jalopy. It was Friday afternoon, but there was no sign of a big sack of groceries in the back seat. I suspected that the family would

be on short rations for the week end, a condition which often prevailed when Mr. Otter's pay was all gone, or his money had to be spent on something else.

But if Mr. Otter had brought nothing good for the stomach, he had brought something good for the eye. Mrs. Otter seemed very pleased with the bunch of wildflowers he'd picked in a roadside meadow to give her. An intensely practical woman, she never harried Mr. Otter, who was so sweet-tempered and could be so impractical.

Even if he could not mend the plow when it was broken and she had to fix it herself, Mr. Otter, among other accomplishments, knew the names of all the first magnitude stars visible in this northern latitude, and could speak three European languages. Mrs. Otter was very proud of him.

Anybody could fix a plow, but how many people could point up into the heavens on a clear night and say, "That big fellow, he Sirius, and the red one Aldebaran," besides speaking Polish, German and Czech?

I said good-by to the family and paused at the foot of the hill to take a last look at the four cherry trees. They were handsome specimens, and fruiting nicely. When next I came to Otter Hill, I told myself, they would be dismembered corpses, the little plumes of cherries exhaling more pathos than perfume. I was glad the Otters were to get that much-needed money, but I hated to see the trees cut down. Their destruction would leave a bleak spot in the landscape. I said good-by to them regretfully.

Katy and I visited friends in the city, and were away a week. When we returned I went over to see the Otters before I unpacked.

Instead of finding four ugly tree stumps, and the cherries themselves reduced to so many cords of wood, I found that the area which the trees were still so benevolently protecting and shading seemed to have become a kind of new universe to the Otter family.

There was a big tent pitched in an open spot near by, and Mrs. Otter was sitting under one of the trees, where the shade was full

of airy coolness, feeding the baby. Every time the baby opened her mouth to take a mouthful, Mrs. Otter unconsciously opened her mouth too.

Mr. Otter, who had learned a thing or two about tailoring in the old country, was busily converting a pair of man-sized pants into a pair of boy-sized pants. Several babies were rolling around on the lawn, eaten up by mosquitoes, flies, and poison ivy, but not seeming to mind in the least. Some of the little girls, in the ragged dresses they slept in (and often used for bathing suits as well), were weaving chains of flowers, and strewing blossoms over Molly, who was lying on her back in the grass pretending to be dead. Every now and then the corpse gave out a little giggle. I counted seven species of birds, come by relays, to pick at the potato peelings, old bones and eggshells strewn about, and to fraternize with Mrs. Otter's remaining hens.

The scene fascinated me, and I wished that I had brought my camera with me. The boys had hung a swing from a stout limb of one of the cherry trees, and Rosie was swinging in it with all her might, singing loudly

*The sun shines east
The sun shines west
The sun shines over
Little Coo-Coo's nest.*

William was cleaning a sizable bass he'd caught in Aspen Pond, and Mickey was patiently waiting for him to extract the bladder, which he was going to float in the creek. Geoff and Walter and Alix were building a circular wooden bench around the thickest of the cherry trees. Cooking utensils and dishes, newly washed, were arranged on a rock to dry in the sun.

"Nice place me got here, eh?" said Mrs. Otter, genially, as though she had just moved into a new house, with plumbing and all modern conveniences.

Rosie, the cow, was tethered to one of the trees, munching

away contentedly. Coo-Coo's diapers, made of old salt sacks, were dangling from various branches to dry. A table, adorned with a milk bottle containing a bunch of blue asters, was set under the trees. Mrs. Otter offered me a cup of the coffee that was brewing on a portable gasoline stove. When she finished one Herculean task, she stopped long enough to take a cup of coffee, and then, amply refreshed, was ready to begin another. Mrs. Otter even gave the little girls coffee on cold winter mornings; she said it was good for them. She herself had been brought up on beer, schnapps, home-made elderberry wine and coffee. She had the greatest contempt for tea, and called it *perfume*.

Mrs. Otter put down the baby and glanced about her happily. It was an ideal summer home, this spot under the cherry trees, and even little Jennie, who so appreciated a nice house, seemed happy and contented. I was only sorry the Otters learned to enjoy the trees just when they were about to be cut down. But Geoff at once gave me the news.

"We like it here," he said. "We ain't gonna worry 'bout the roof 'til we hafta, and there's plenty o' time before cold weather sets in. We're glad the trees didn't git cut down, but we're gitten a hundred dollars' wortha fun outa them jist the same, I'm tellin' ya!"

"Aren't they going to be cut down?"

Molly, who had been playing dead, opened her eyes and watched me intently. "When the men came ta cut down the trees, Molly screamed and kicked," said Geoff. "She had a regular tantrum, didn't cha, Molly?" he said.

Geoff seemed very proud of the tantrum Molly had had, and of the little girl for having it.

"Yes," she piped.

"See that robin's nest up in that branch?" said Geoff. "It's got four baby robins in it."

I looked up, just in time to see the mother bird, which seemed unusually tame, return to the nest with a green caterpillar in her beak. "Molly was 'fraid if the trees got chopped down the robin's nest would break, and they'd all be killed. The men only laughed

at us when Pa asked 'em if they couldn't wait till the birds was old 'nough ta fly before they cut down the trees," Geoff went on, "so Pa said if they couldn't wait the County could keep the hundred dollars and we'd keep the trees."

Here Geoff's voice again showed pride for a member of the family. "Of course that was jist like Pa," he said. "He's awfully sentimental, as William said. He thought it was bad 'nough when *our* house got wrecked, without wreckin' the robins' house. He said he had sixteen kids hisself, and didn't wanna break up another fambly, even if they was only birds."

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

The Music of the Flood

The north country was deluged with cloudbursts late in August, and Otter Creek went on a big spree.

A flood surged through Smoky Valley, Geoff Otter went into a unique business as the result of it, and old Corry was brought back to Otter Hill.

The cloudbursts occurred in the village and above it, over a period of a week. Modest Nine-mile-Creek, of which Otter Creek was but a tributary, and normally a shallow pebbly stream, became a raging torrent. During the flood Otter Creek was navigable by raft and rowboat, and Mrs. Otter said she hardly expected to get through it without a drowning in the family. She simply couldn't keep the excited boys and their boats off the swollen stream.

One morning Geoff Otter came over in his high boots and asked if he might borrow our tennis net. "But this is hardly tennis weather, Geoff," I said, after I had fetched it. "Do you want some balls and rackets, too?"

"No, we ain't gonna play tennis," replied Geoff, grinning. He thanked me for the net, threw it over his back and without explana-

tions went across the lawn, which was under two inches of water. I soon found out what the youngster was up to.

Geoff had been sitting on a big rock hanging over the creek, watching the flood sweep past. He had the type of mind that sought to turn all things, even natural phenomena, into financial profit. The creek was then at its highest flood level, almost even with the floor of the red iron bridge. Geoff saw a kitchen chair—one of which Mrs. Otter was badly in need—come floating downstream. He fished it out with a rope and presented it to Mrs. Otter, much to her delight.

If a kitchen chair came along, perhaps a kitchen table would come along next. The thought of useful items like these getting by was more than Geoff could bear, so casting about for something to catch them with, he had thought of a tennis net as being the most practical. Accordingly, Geoff, with the help of his brothers, stretched our net across the creek, weighing it down with chunks of scrap iron, and tying the ends to trees on each bank. Geoff said he didn't see why they shouldn't benefit by the furnishings of the dwellings, summer camps, cottages and gardens which were apt to become footloose as a result of the flood; and, with such an arrangement, nothing could get by them.

After Geoff and his brothers had put out the net, they sat and waited in a fever of impatience for whatever was to come along. They were disappointed, for by nightfall, not a single object had been snagged except an old rubber boot, full of holes. But after racing down the hill at sunrise next morning, Geoff was rewarded. The night had been a fruitful one. Wedged against one side of the net was a perfect debris of household goods and miscellaneous articles which Mrs. Otter would highly prize and they could all use.

The boys got on their raft, and pushed it out into the stream to collect their catch and tow it ashore. In half an hour, they had lined up on the bank of the creek a maple drop-leaf table, three kitchen chairs, a kitchen cabinet, a chest of drawers, window frames, doors, parcels of shingles and a flag pole, and odd pieces of lumber which could be used for a new roof.

The furniture dried out evenly in the sun, somewhat bleached but not spotted, and the woodwork shone richly after an application of furniture polish and elbow grease. When I visited Otter Hill and saw the first catch, I couldn't decide whether the Otters were guilty of highway robbery, looting, or just ordinary scavenging. Since it was my tennis net they were using, I wondered if I might possibly be considered an accessory to their crimes.

William declared that if the county were under martial law, Geoff would probably be shot. Calvin advised the boys to do their hauling after nightfall, when nobody could see them, but this, Mrs. Otter said, was much too dangerous.

Every evening just before it got dark, Geoff and his brothers would stretch the net across the creek and bring in their catch next morning. In the second haul, they got a spinnet desk, a cradle, an ironing board, and a big wash-basket. Mrs. Otter enjoyed the fun as much as the boys, and she was quite as excited as they. She encouraged them to go right on with the game, saying that since eventually they might have to surrender the loot they had snatched from the creek, the boys might just as well have the fun of catching and saving it. The next catch was a chicken coop, a fifteen-foot ladder, and a garden bench. If they were only on the Mississippi, declared Mrs. Otter, perhaps a barn might come floating down, and then she would be content.

After a couple of days of this netting, the sport became an obsession with Geoff.

He was full of plans. He wanted to put an ad in the *Morning Star* advertising the goods he had caught, and saying "reward expected." He wanted Mrs. Otter to hire a big truck, and take their catch to another part of the country, where nobody knew the family and auction it off. There was nothing more thrilling, declared Geoff, than to run down to the net in the morning and see what wonderful things the creek had brought them during the night. You just couldn't tell what was coming along next. The water rose steadily and with it Geoff's elation; he wished the flood would last forever.

Otter Hill, of course, was perfectly safe, but Red Maples was menaced by the rising stream.

The road in front of our house was under a foot of water. Down in the basement one day, the ironing board, with a pound of butter and six freshly laundered shirts on it, floated right up to the ceiling. When the water receded, the butter stuck to one of the rafters, but we found the shirts in a perfect state of preservation after the ironing board settled on the basement floor again in a foot of mud.

Every morning after breakfast I would put on my boots, and ford the watery road over to Otter Creek to see what Geoff had caught in his net.

Play pens, bamboo rakes, ice boxes, plows, wheelbarrows—Geoff collected them all. One morning a little parade of about fifty wooden crates came floating merrily downstream, all in a row. Mrs. Otter considered them a great catch; they were just the thing to put over young tomato plants in the nighttime, to keep away rabbits and avoid loss by frost—and for storing potatoes, too, of which the family had put in a big crop that year. The boys said they wished for another cloudburst or two, to keep up the water level in the flood delta; and they got their wish.

Heavy rains continued to fall throughout the north country, and the creek was in flood almost three weeks. One day a dog house with three rooms in it, which Calvin declared he had seen on the lawn of a cottage on Panther River about sixteen miles away, came floating down the creek. Fluffy at once moved into an elaborate new home.

The Otters kept the news of their netting a secret from outsiders. It was Geoff's great fear that someone who lived upstream might hear of his sport and copy his idea. In that case, Geoff said, they would catch everything and he would get nothing. Certainly, he didn't want that to happen. He told me he didn't believe that the climax to his netting had yet come. He felt sure that he was still to catch some strange, wonderful, and perfectly unexpected thing.

One morning, while Alix and Walter were helping me carry

buckets of mud out of the cellar, Mickey came running over and down the back steps. He was so frightened he stuttered when he asked me to come over right away. I was afraid one of the children had finally drowned in the swollen creek, but Mickey shook his head and said no, it was something Geoff had just caught in our tennis net.

We put down our buckets, and went over in our high boots, to find the Otters assembled on the creek bank.

In their frightened looks was an admixture of guilt and incredulity. Geoff tried to grin when he saw me, but without success; he was really quite white under his tan. I had exercised my imagination to the utmost on the way over, but I wasn't quite prepared for what I did find. "Well, what did you ketch, Geoff?" asked Alix, while I looked from one subdued Otter to another.

"A man," replied Geoff, in accents of awe; and Mrs. Otter shook her head in halfhearted affirmation.

"A man? How? Did he come floating down the creek in his bed, sound asleep?"

"No, a dead man," said Geoff. "There he is. All tangled up in the net and that little uprooted tree." I'd never heard Geoff use such short sentences before. I hadn't believed him capable of them. The damp Otters, in their high boots, plastered with mud from head to foot, looked like drowned rats, and were, collectively, in a state of indecision. Geoff was frightfully annoyed with himself for having caught a man and causing his family so much embarrassment. All the fun was quite spoilt. "What you think?" Mrs. Otter asked, chagrin written all over her face. "Should we call police?"

"Well, let's call Dr. Barney," I said. "He's the county coroner, you know. But first I'll get on the raft and take a look at the man." I'd seen too many dead men in China to be upset by one who had merely drowned.

The tennis net had broken away from the opposite bank, and had been swept into the middle of the stream. Tangled strong in its folds was a body and a small uprooted tree. I pulled at the net cord, and the mass, consisting of tree, tangled net and human

body, moved slowly towards the raft. I was able to examine the body closely. It was old Corry.

Geoff tossed me a rope, and in a little while I had towed the old man in to the shore. "Who is it?" whispered Geoff. "Somebody we know?"

"Yes, somebody we know."

"It's old Corry, I'll bet," guessed Geoff.

Mrs. Otter started to cry, and the babies set up a howl that could be heard a mile downstream. One of the boys fetched an old army blanket, with which I covered the body after I got it up on the grass. We then retired to the verandah to hold what could be called a species of wake. Mrs. Otter made hot coffee for everybody, and passed around cookies. Geoff indulged in many gloomy speculations about his probable fate. He bravely resolved to make a clean breast of it all, and, being the ringleader, had determined to assume the guilt for everything. His excuse was to be that by taking his catches from the creek, he had saved them from destruction downstream or in Aspen Pond where the flood would eventually have deposited them.

Dr. Barney arrived two hours later in the coroner's wagon, accompanied by his assistant, a young medical student. He greeted the Otters in his good-naturedly crabbed way, and at once singled out Geoff, his favorite. "Well, Geoff, who's been drinking this time?" he boomed.

"You drink, doc," cried Mrs. Otter, plainly showing her anxiety to be on the right side. "Me get you glassful cider, one for young feller, too." She opened the trap door and disappeared into the cellar.

"Nobody's been drinkin', doc, and Pa ain't here. We ain't jist got a drunken man on our hands this time. D'ya remember when you was here last, you said you'd rather find a drunken man than a dead one? Well, sorry ta disappoint ya. This time it's a dead man. I caught him whilst I was fishing. And these are some of the things I caught." Geoff made a sweeping motion, indicating the loot lined up on the lawn to dry in the sun.

"So you caught a man? What did you use for bait?" asked the doctor.

"Didn't use no bait, doc," said Geoff. "Jist used this here tennis net. That's how we caught all this other stuff too."

"Well, let's have a look at him," said the doctor. Dr. Barney ran his eyes over some of the items the Otters had fished from the creek. "Mrs. DeBanks will be glad to get that old table back, Geoff," he said. "Her great grand-father made it, almost a hundred years ago. She thought the world of it. I'm not sure she won't give you a reward."

Geoff brightened a little. I had a notion he would emerge from this debacle a hero. The Otters trotted down to the creek, following the doctor and his assistant who carried along their cider glasses. Dr. Barney lifted the blanket to examine the body, and the assistant searched old Corry's clothes for identification. None of the Otters admitted they had known the demented old fellow.

The assistant coroner produced a small ladies' bag from one of old Corry's cavernous coat pockets. It was a beaded bag, and the Otters recognized it at once. "Lena's bag," gasped Geoff. "That she thought was left in the barn and that she thought got burnt up." Geoff went on in whispers. "Old Corry had it all the time. He musta stole it from the barn the day it got struck by lightning."

The bag was water-soaked, of course. When the young man opened it, under the eyes of the Otters, it was found to be crammed with money—water-soaked money, but quite reclaimable. There were all Lena's hundred, fifty, and twenty dollar bills.

"Old Corry was probably gonna throw it away," said Geoff. "Maybe in the creek, like he did that change. Then he fell in himself and maybe stayed there until the flood picked him up and brought him downstream." Geoff summed it up like that and he was probably right.

"So Lena's money didn't git burnt, it got drowned," said Mickey.

Burnt or drowned, the Otters did not profit by it. Dr. Barney took it in charge, saying he would ask Father Justin to help him

locate the girl or her mother. As it happened, the money never reached Lena.

Mrs. DeBanks gave Geoff a ten dollar bill for the return of the old kitchen table Dr. Barney had recognized. Outside of that, none of the other stuff Geoff had caught was claimed by the rightful owners. Before the flood subsided, half a dozen families, many of them very respectable folk, had stretched nets across Otter Creek in Smoky Valley.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Leftie

*A*ll attempts made by Father Justin to locate Lena or her mother failed, and when old Corry was buried in the country cemetery visible from Otter Hill across the valley, there were no relatives to mourn him. Only Katy and I, and the Otters were there to see him put into the ground.

This was the cemetery in which little Elsie Otter and her brothers Joey and Johnnie were buried. All Mrs. Otter had to do, she told me, was to look out of her kitchen window, and she could see the spot where her children were sleeping. That made them seem quite near to her. In good weather she visited the graves twice a week, sometimes taking a bunch of flowers from her yard with which to decorate them, sometimes stopping to pick flowers that had escaped from old gardens and were now blooming along the wayside—sweet peas, golden glow, musk-mallow and old-fashioned roses.

Some of the little girls, who couldn't remember their dead brothers and sister, could of course remember old Corry and they were always running to the cemetery with bunches of field lilies and bluebells they picked to put on the grave. Mrs. Otter told me that if she lost her home and had to move away, the thing she would most miss was the feeling of contentment that it gave her to be so

close to the graves of her dead children, all of whom were there excepting Leftie. He was buried in a crowded cemetery in a Pennsylvania city, but Mrs. Otter said eventually she would have him brought here. Then they would all be together.

I could tell by Mrs. Otter's face that it was a comfortable thought. A graveyard, to the Otters, was as natural a thing as a farm. Every time the children accompanied Mrs. Otter to the cemetery, they decided where their own graves were going to be—and even quarreled over them. "Here's where I'm gonna be," Geoff would say, with a mixture of pride and complacency in his voice. "Right under this little beech tree."

Molly said that when she died, she wanted to lie between Elsie, her twin and Mrs. Otter; and Mickey's place, selected by him, was between William and Calvin. One lovely evening, just as the blue light was fading and the cooling air made the flower scents more poignant, I visited old Corry's grave and found Mrs. Otter there with some of the children.

It was on this occasion that she told me about Leftie. Even the small Otters, born long after Leftie died, had their share of anecdote concerning him to pass on to me.

He was called Leftie because he was left-handed. And he could do almost anything. He was smarter even than William or Calvin.

That was way down in Pennsylvania, in a city over two hundred miles away. Leftie was ten years old, and he was riding his new bicycle when a truck with a drunken driver at the wheel all but annihilated him. He had been unconscious for two days, and he woke up in a hospital. He wasn't able to move his legs.

Mrs. Otter told me she well remembered how hard Leftie had worked and saved to buy the bicycle that was his undoing. He had peddled papers after school, and scarcely a week went by when he didn't earn almost a dollar which he handed over to her—half for herself, half to be put away towards its purchase. Mrs. Otter had a job at that time, as cleaning woman in the City Hall. Mr. Otter worked in a box factory.

That part of the city in Pennsylvania in which the family lived

at the time was like the country, really; there were meadows to roam in, hills to climb, little woody places to play Buffalo Bill and Wild West. One day Leftie killed a big copperhead that was sunning itself on a rock in the pine woods. Most of all, he liked to play in a crumbling old churchyard, near where they lived, and catch chameleons that scuttled amongst the broken tombstones. He often wondered, as he lay in his bed, if the accident wasn't his punishment for stealing berries that grew in the cemetery. This was desecration, for cemeteries belong to the church, and are consecrated ground.

Leftie remained in the hospital three weeks.

After that, they took him home, and the gang used to come in and see him every day. "My mother said your back's broke," said one of the kids, one day.

"It is not," replied Leftie, indignantly, but looking dreadfully ashamed. He never asked Mrs. Otter if his back was really broken. He just heatedly denied it, when one of the boys asked him if this was true.

It seemed that Leftie didn't want to worry his mother by letting her know how much he knew about himself.

Leftie was as proud of Mrs. Otter as she was proud of him. William, two years younger than Leftie, seemed only a little boy in comparison. One day the Mayor, whose office Mrs. Otter cleaned in the City Hall, told her she was the best cleaning woman he had ever had, and when she came home she told Leftie what the Mayor had said.

How proud he was! He boasted about it to the other kids. "The Mayor said my mother's the best cleaning woman he ever had." None of the other kids had anybody who worked in an important place like the City Hall, and none of the other kids had ever seen the Mayor, who thought so highly of his mother.

But Leftie had seen him. One day, when he was nine, he had taken the downtown trolley to visit the City Hall. Mrs. Otter had met him in front of that imposing building, and then she had taken him up in the elevator, three flights, to the floor she was in charge

of. She let Leftie see the little room where she kept her mops and pails. She let him peer through the big door into the Mayor's office. And there, at his desk, sat His Honor.

He was a very broad man, with a vehement red face and a thick neck, and he smoked tremendous cigars, and he was going to run for governor after a while. He had such an impressive way of clearing his throat—brumm—harrumpf!—it was really a thrilling moment for Leftie. Just a glimpse of the Mayor's back would have satisfied Leftie, but it happened that the great man, as if he had eyes in the back of his head, seemed to know that a little admiring boy was standing in the doorway; and he turned, and smiled, and invited Leftie in, and spoke to him for three minutes! Then he gave him a handful of celluloid buttons, with his picture on every one of them!

Leftie, according to Mrs. Otter, conducted himself very well; stood up before the Mayor beautifully, and answered all the Mayor's questions in a firm voice; and Mrs. Otter, hovering in the background and listening, was delighted with him.

"A fine boy you have," the Mayor had told Mrs. Otter. "Some day you'll be very proud of him."

Ah, me! sighed Mrs. Otter, when she told me about it. But Leftie had had a wonderful store of memories to draw upon in his adversity.

"Mum, when I get well and get up, we'll go fishing out to Mudbank, won't we?" he used to say.

—Sure, sure. Fish all day. Have good time, by golly!

—And maybe we'll catch a fine silver bass!

—Yes, catch a silver bass. Take him to Mayor.

—Wouldn't the Mayor be surprised, though!

—You bet! Give us hundred dollar.

—One hundred dollars. Gee, Mum!

The silver bass was a fabulous fish to Leftie and the Otters. Only one had been caught that he knew of, and the local Fishing and Hunting Club, of which the Mayor was president, had had it stuffed and mounted. One hundred dollars in prize money would

go to the lucky individual who caught another, and Leftie dreamed of being that person!

In the time before his accident, Mrs. Otter used to set out for the City Hall at the same time Leftie started out for school.

After they parted, Mrs. Otter to take the downtown trolley, Leftie to cut across a field, they would turn back several times for last glimpses of each other; Mrs. Otter would wave her huge black bag and Leftie would flourish his books by the strap which held them together. Leftie liked school well enough, and the nuns would have made a favorite of him had he allowed it. But he liked peddling papers after school even better. He made so many friends that way. The friend he loved most was a little colored boy named Oliver. Oliver never came to see Leftie when he was laid up, and Leftie silently grieved for him.

The boys took turns peddling papers; little as Calvin and William were, they knew the route. One of them was always home to peel the potatoes and set the table, before Mrs. Otter arrived from the City Hall with the meat she had stopped for on her way home. After Mr. Otter came in, and the meat was cooked, they would sit down to supper, and Mrs. Otter would tell them all the latest political news and scandal she had heard that day at the City Hall.

Leftie, like his parents, and like the Mayor, was a staunch Republican.

That first summer in bed, excavators and steam shovels did great things on the street. By lifting his head a bit, Leftie could see them at work. The pine sidewalks were torn up and replaced with solid cement blocks. A great sewer was dug, and pipes were laid that brought gas and running water. All the kids were outside, watching the workmen, and playing in the sewers and crawling through the pipes after the workmen went away. Leftie enjoyed the noise the machinery made.

Sometimes he saw a bunch of fellows pass the house with their fish poles, and he wished he could go to Mudbank, too. If somebody else caught that silver bass! He keenly felt the helplessness of his position—no more fish to catch for Mum. During the day,

when he was alone (in winter, of course, the boys were in school, and in summer usually outdoors) Leftie read from books a little, and looked at pictures, but his chief delight was fixing clocks.

It was surprising how many clocks there were in the neighborhood that needed fixing. If Leftie had a clock to tinker with the day didn't seem half so long. He had his own little tool kit, and very soon his fame as a clock repairman spread, and he was earning money.

How glad he felt when he had saved a dollar to give to Mum! Sometimes Leftie worked happily on a clock all day long, so absorbed that he forgot to eat the cold lunch Mrs. Otter had prepared for him before going to the City Hall that morning. Then, at four o'clock, he would hear the gate hinge creak, which meant that William and Calvin had come home from school. They would dash into his bedroom and tell him what had happened in school that day. He couldn't keep his eyes off the boys, he was so glad to see them.

Once a week, Mrs. Otter had to do something dreadful to Leftie, and he would be so hurt, so embarrassed, he couldn't bring himself to speak to her for hours afterward. Mrs. Otter did this on Sunday mornings, which was the only time she had. She felt awful about it too—dreaded it as much as Leftie did, perhaps more. It was as though they had struck each other. Leftie would look away and wouldn't answer Mrs. Otter if she spoke to him. Terrible humiliation he felt every time, and great surprise, too—how could Mum do such a thing to him?

Mrs. Otter's eyes filled with tears when she told me about it. Yes—Leftie would be mad at her for hours afterward. Then he would soften and consent to eat the lunch she brought up, with many anxious flutterings over him, and the greatest solicitude—which made him feel so sorry for her.

Leftie never fixed clocks on Saturdays or Sundays. He saved them for week days when he was home alone. On Saturdays and Sundays he was vastly content to watch Mrs. Otter and his brothers move about in his room, or out in the kitchen—any-

where within hearing if not within sight. He liked to follow their movements with his eyes and to know what they were doing.

It was a big day in Leftie's life when he enticed a great redbird to come to his window sill with bread crumbs. The redbird had enormous yellow eyes, and standing on the window sill, only four feet away, he had watched his young host with impudent confidence. The two most distinguished visitors Leftie had had so far were the Mayor and the redbird.

Yes, the Mayor had come to see him one day! And the things he had brought—books, games, candy, oranges, little tools and his own office clock to mend! Truly, a broken back had many compensations.

Leftie lay two years on his back, such a long time. Pills and medicine were so expensive, he felt shame for all the money he had cost Mum. Mum, who worked so hard cleaning floors in the City Hall. . . .

Late in the afternoons of his second winter in bed, when it got dark at four o'clock, he commenced to have queer little spells of fright. He told Mrs. Otter he often heard whispering outside his window and that he could hear clocks ticking in his sleep. He believed if Mum opened up the window, they would see folk outside, waiting to come in; and that there must be clocks, in great numbers, concealed behind the walls. Suddenly Leftie, who had never been afraid of the biggest dog, or even walking through the graveyard after dark, became afraid of the dark. Mrs. Otter kept a kerosene lamp burning low all night long.

He died one Sunday morning when all the family were around him. Not long afterward, Mr. Otter lost his job in the box factory, and Mrs. Otter, fond as she was of the Mayor, resigned her position in the City Hall. It was then the family decided to migrate to New York State. They lived in half a dozen places, all in the same neighborhood, before they found Otter Hill.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

The Little Fox

Katy said she thought the Otters were being tested as Job had been tested by the Lord.

He had given them Lena, and when she was warming the family with her beauty and her affection, He had taken her away. He had taken away their herd, their flocks, burnt their barn, all but destroyed their home—and now it looked as though He were about to remove the very last remnants of the barnyard. These were Rosie, the cow, Gimpy, the pet hen—and Mr. Otter's jalopy.

Gimpy the Otters owned free and clear. As for Rosie, they had purchased her early in the spring for sixty dollars, paying ten dollars down and agreeing to pay the balance in monthly installments of ten. The jalopy, which Mr. Otter drove to work daily and was as necessary to the family as Rosie, was acquired in more or less the same way. Creditors were besieging the Otters, and today there was an additional dark cloud in the air. Over the protests of a dozen of the children present, Mrs. Otter had just sentenced Gimpy (she was an aged Rhode Island Red) to death, execution to take place within an hour.

The small Otters made pets of their hens, and hated to see them go to the block one by one when they lost their value as layers. Gimpy had become just like one of the family, and she was the very last of Mrs. Otter's old flock to come to the guillotine. The yard was strewn with their plucked feathers.

"See, there she is over there," said Geoff, mournfully. "Scratchin' away, jist as unconcerned. She don't know that in a little while she'll be floppin' 'round with her head off."

I looked up to see Gimpy pecking industriously at the potato peelings and egg shells with which the yard was littered. "You take an old horse, and put 'em in a field when he ain't of no use

ta anybody any more," said Geoff, and paused to look at Mrs. Otter accusingly. The inference was obvious.

"Horse meat no good to eat, Geoff. Anyway, me never try it," said the practical Mrs. Otter. "If me keep Gimpy too long, she get tough and me no can chew her." Mrs. Otter's appetite wasn't gone, if most of her teeth were.

"Tough or tender, I won't eat a mouthful o' Gimpy," said Geoff. "It would make me feel like a cannibal. That's one thing I ain't come ta yet."

"And if me no chop her head off," Mrs. Otter went on, soothingly, "fox get her pretty soon, anybody."

"Anyway, Mum," said Walter, gently.

Mrs. Otter knew Geoff was quite incensed with the fox. Using William's .22 rifle, he had hunted all spring and summer, getting only fleeting glimpses of the animal now and then. Geoff maintained it followed him through the woods to chuckle at him from behind.

Finally, one day, Geoff came upon the fox sound asleep under an apple tree on a hillside. Here was his opportunity but he didn't take it. The fox looked so pretty, asleep under the apple tree, Geoff hadn't the heart to kill it; and besides it was hardly sporting to shoot an animal while it was unconscious. Geoff shouted and gave the fox a good scare, only to regret it a minute later when the little red ball of fur vanished over the hilltop like a meteor.

"Gimpy's too smart to let the fox get her, Mum," said Geoff. "Besides, if Gimpy ain't 'round here no more, the fox won't come, and then we'll never git him. And you know how many of our chickens he stole this summer."

I caught Geoff's glance, and I guessed he was wondering if I might constitute a Court of Appeals from Mrs. Otter's decision. I must confess all my sympathies were on his side. I hated to see the children lose the little pet hen.

"It won't be the same 'round here without Gimpy," declared Mickey. "Mornings she flies up on my window sill and wakes me up. I wouldn't even be glad if I got the wishbone."

A cluster of small Otters was huddled in a verandah corner making anxious listeners. "It ain't as if Gimpy costs us anything, Mum," Geoff went on. "You know how she scratches for herself."

Little Molly piped, "Me don't want Mamma ta chop off Gimpy's neck. Gimpy nice chicken."

"Gimpy old chicken," said Mrs. Otter, reasonably. "If me no kill her, pretty soon she die, and then me no can eat her."

"All the time I wasted teachin' her tricks," cried Geoff, unhappily. "Gimpy was smart enough for a circus. All I hadda do was call fox! fox! and she'd come flyin' crost the yard."

"It not fox she think about, but bread crumb you give her," said Mrs. Otter, drily. She dropped the last potato into the bucket, shook the peelings from her apron, and everybody seemed to realize that Gimpy's time had come. "Geoff, you go out, ketch Gimpy," she said in businesslike tones, as she stepped into the woodshed adjoining the kitchen to find the hatchet.

"Oh, shucks, I don't hafta ketch Gimpy. She allus comes when I call her," said Geoff, angrily. "You know how smart she is." A group of small Otters accompanied their mother to the yard to share Gimpy's last moments, but some of the children, not wishing to hear the little red hen's last agonized squawk, hid under the verandah. Geoff called "Gimpy, Gimpy," in unhappy tones, and the implacable Mrs. Otter waited at the chopping block, which was as stained with red as the sacrificial altar of any Aztec god.

But Gimpy had vanished. Geoff looked into the barn and a minute later he came running out, his face radiant.

"Ma," he cried excitedly. "Guess what! Gimpy's layin' an egg."

Mrs. Otter wouldn't believe it. "Geoff, you fool me," she said, sternly. Gimpy, such an old hen, had presumably left egghood behind her for good.

"Come and see for yourself then. What else would she be doin' in the nest for this timea day? She musta heard us talkin' 'bout her," he added, with that irresistible grin, "and decided ta git busy." Mrs. Otter wouldn't kill a productive hen.

She stepped into the barn to confirm Geoff's findings and then the Otters retired en masse to the verandah to sit and wait.

The little red hen sat in her nest for the better part of an hour. I had the strangest feeling that I was in the maternity ward of a hospital, waiting for a baby to come. Gimpy was such an elderly hen, and it had been such a long time since she'd laid an egg, I felt concerned for her, and so did the Otters. They spoke in low tones and looked anxious.

When the sound of a mild cackling came from the henhouse the Otters all flew out to investigate. In a moment, a procession of them returned to the verandah, headed by Geoff, who was carrying a medium-sized, white egg. The blossom of a century plant could have evoked no more delight, praise, and admiration than was bestowed by the Otters upon that egg. Gimpy's death sentence was immediately annulled, and she was given a meal of cracked corn and bread crumbs for her reward. She ate it unconcernedly, just as if she had not narrowly escaped losing her head.

"Now we kin take a walk," said Geoff, "and when we come back Gimpy'll still be here."

We took a walk, and when we came back Gimpy was comfortably dusting her feathers in a sand heap. But meanwhile, another situation had risen to plunge the Otters into gloom.

Mrs. Otter showed no signs of alarm, however. She sat under the thorn-apple tree, cleaning dandelion greens.

In spring, when they were tender shoots, she served them in some form of salad, but later on when the leaves had become tough she cooked them, like spinach or beet tops. Mrs. Otter attributed much of the radiant health of her family to the big dish of bitter dandelion greens she put on the table almost every day in spring and summer.

She got up to fling out the discarded stalks for Gimpy to pick on, and I wondered, when I got back to Red Maples, and looked through a very old illustrated Bible, if I could find in it the picture she had just created. Whether she was drawing water from

the well, bending over a furrow, scattering seed or feeding the baby, Mrs. Otter was always falling into Biblical poses, re-creating scenes from the Old Testament.

"Mr. Lee was here whilst you was in the woods," little Dennis told us. "And he brung bad news."

Mrs. Otter nodded and the boys stared at her, waiting. Mr. Lee was the postman. He had told Mrs. Otter that work on the WPA dam in Happy Valley was to be discontinued next day and that all the men were to be laid off. "Gee, that means that dad's outa a job," said Geoff, collapsing in the grass, looking rather like a deflated balloon.

"Every time we try ta make both ends meet, a big hole comes in the middle," said Mickey, indignantly.

Walter sat down and put his chin in the cup of his hands. After a little while he said, "It must be tough for a man to be saddled down with a big family and out of a job. If Pa was single, he wouldn't mind. I'll bet lots of times he wished he didn't have so many of us to clutter up his life with."

"Oh, if Lena was only here," wailed Jennie.

I picked up Jennie and put her in my lap. It was this little girl who missed Lena more than the others, excepting William. One day I had found her under the bridge, hiding away from everybody and crying very hard. Her tears seemed to be a compound of lonesomeness for Lena, whom she adored and had sought to emulate, and despair because the house on Otter Hill was just a slatternly old farmhouse again, exactly as it had been before Lena came. Jennie had enjoyed camping under the cherry trees, but now there was a roof of sorts on the house once more, and the chickens, as in the old days, were taking short cuts through the kitchen to the back yard. What upset me was the way Jennie had wept the day I found her under the bridge—not as a little girl would have wept, but rather like a tired, discouraged old woman, who realized the tears she shed were hopeless ones, that nothing would be done about them. After that, Katy and I took Jennie to stay with us for a week to make her happy again.

The faces of the small Otters brightened at the mere mention of Lena. "When's Lena comin' home?" asked Tessie, for the thousandth time.

"I want Lena ta come home," piped Molly.

"Lena come home pretty soon," said Mrs. Otter, soothingly. "You wait and see."

"Pa's comin' home pretty soon too," said Mickey, "and when he does we'll hafta tell him the bad news if he ain't heard it awready."

William came up the hill from the creek where he had had a bath. Everything about him shone; William seemed to walk in a kind of perpetual splendor. Few men are attractive in their undershirts, but William was one of them. "Dad caught a ride down to the Settlement to buy groceries," he said, worriedly. "Perhaps he'll hear about it there. He's not working today."

The family felt very sorry for Mr. Otter. They would hate to see him come up the hill, having to tell him—if he didn't know it already—that he had lost his job.

But if Mrs. Otter felt badly about it she didn't show it at all. It was only illness in the family that seemed to disturb her almost Oriental repose; I'm sure she could have supplied a good chapter to any book on The Importance of Living. She was scraping away at carrots now, with Gimpy at her feet waiting for tidbits. Gimpy was being rewarded all day long for having laid that egg.

Said Geoff in his engaging pessimistic way: "B'lee me we'll hafta stretch out them groceries ta make 'em last. Won't be long before the big bad wolf'll be pawing at our front door."

"Me not afraid of wolf," piped Molly. She was all spattered and sticky; looked like a yellow lollypop rescued from an ash heap. Since the time Molly had earned her first dime by filling an evaporated milk can with worms and selling them to a fisherman, she went on automatically digging and filling cans with worms all day long.

Alix was stuffing wedges of newspaper into the toes of his shoes, which were two sizes too big for him. "I only hope when Pa's down

in Union Settlement, he don't stop at Tenney's to make the final payment on Rosie. We need that money," he added. "If they come for Rosie, we can tell 'em she got drowned in the swamp. We can't git along without Rosie even if we can't make the payments on her."

The smallest Otters carried bleak memories of Mr. Otter's periods of unemployment, when the canned goods which Mrs. Otter regarded as her famine store had to be tapped—an alarming extremity. Even the babies seemed to know it when the cracked china cup which Mrs. Otter kept in the cupboard and which served as family treasury department, had no money in it with which to buy groceries. "Not only is the payment on Rosie due this week," Alix went on frankly, "but today's the day Mr. Monger sends his boy Elmer ta collect the twenny dollars Pa owes on the jalopy. Cripes! It never rains but wot it pours."

The jalopy was Mr. Otter's Chevy Sedan, vintage of 1924 (it would hold all eighteen Otters, packed together like sardines, when they went forth on a Sunday excursion) and successor to his late Model T, which perished miserably in a landslide of May mud on the steep slopes of Otter Hill one day after a storm. Mrs. Otter laughed reassuringly and caught Alix by the hair to give it a good pull.

"Got three fat pigs to kill," she said, cheerfully. "We not starve." Mrs. Otter stood up, shook out her apron and expanded her chest, which was so mountainous Alix had to make a little detour to get past it. "Besides, fresh air almost good enough to live on," she said, drawing great drafts of it into her lungs.

"It's good enough on the lungs, but in the stomach it gives me the cramps," said Geoff. "Maybe," he went on, thoughtfully, "when Mr. Monger's Elmer comes we kin talk ourselves outa makin' the payment and keep the jalopy jist the same. We'll need that twenny dollars for more groceries and Pa can't git along without no car. How will he be able to go to work if he ain't got no car ta take him?"

"If papa have no job, he no need car," said Mrs. Otter, reasonably.

"But if he ain't got no car, he can't go out and find no work," said the practical Geoff.

"If Lena was here," said Mickey, "all she'd hafta do is make goo-goo eyes at Elmer and he'd let us have the car for nothin'."

I listened to this discussion with helpless sympathy and admiration, realizing that the Otters had had problems like these to face all too frequently. But their wits had been sharpened by encounters with collectors and creditors, whom they took more or less for granted.

Mrs. Otter, it was said in the village, could readily vanish—as if she owned a cloak of invisibility—into the thin air upon sight of a bill collector a dozen paces away. When I saw a car climb up Otter Hill, driven by Elmer Monger, whose father owned a used car business in the village, I made an excuse and slipped away, promising, as Geoff cheerfully suggested, to come around later to see how they made out.

The entire family—even the babies—looked excited at the prospect of a skirmish with Elmer, and I chuckled to myself when I heard Mrs. Otter start right off, in no uncertain terms, to let him know how impossible it was going to be for him to get any money out of her that month.

"Elmer Monger, you cannot draw blood from the stone," she cried. "Money go out faster than it come in, me cannot hang on to him. My cow, she get lost in swamp and drown, must buy new one; my husband he lose his job in Happy Valley, and now me got kidney that alla time make Molly wet bed. Must take her to doctor. Everybody can wait for his money, or they can all gone to hell."

While Mrs. Otter's coolness in dealing with Elmer Monger delighted me, I wished it were Otter prosperity rather than Otter adversity which afforded me so much diversion. Here I was, practically a well man again, and I felt I owed it all to the Otters. They had completely captured my imagination and every waking hour of my summer days in the country were filled with thoughts of them. If I wasn't seeing them, I was thinking about them. When you

have such a compelling interest it is usually a very good thing for you. No doctor could have prescribed better medicine for me than the Otter family turned out to be. I ate my lunch in a fever of impatience to know how they had made out with Elmer, and a couple of hours later found me climbing the Hill again.

This time Mrs. Otter was sitting in her rocker mending stockings. Coo-Coo was having a swim in the copper washboiler, and several eager babies were anxiously waiting for their turn. The little girls were rolling in the grass, and some of the boys having a game of chew-the-peg. Geoff was spreading salve on Tessie's legs—she had got a touch of poison ivy. "Well," he said, "we made a big mistake when we told Elmer Pa lost his job. Elmer said he *hadda* take the jalopy in that case, because with Pa outta work he wouldn't be able ta make any payments. Now, when poor Pa comes home, we gotta tell him not only that he lost his job but that we wasn't smart enough ta hang on ta the jalopy."

Geoff told Tessie to hold still, if she wanted to be cured of her poison ivy. "Well, if the worst comes to the worst, Ma kin have the money I earned pickin' Mrs. Ashley's berries. I was gonna spend it on the dentis', but what's the use of gettin' your teeth fixed up, if you ain't gonna eat."

"Mum kin have my money, too," said Alix. "I was gonna buy a Sunday suit o' clothes for church. But Father Justin said you're jist as welcome in the House of God with your old clothes on."

"I should hope so," said Mickey, contemptuously. "If Jesus—"

Mickey once confessed to me he believed neither in God nor Santa Claus. Mrs. Otter clapped her hand over his mouth to smother the flow of invective, and then turned to slap Molly, who had just picked and was about to eat a fuchsia bud, growing on a plant that was healthily sprouting from an old coffee can.

Mrs. Otter regarded depriving a plant of one of its buds as a species of rape.

"I wish Pa would hurry up," said Geoff. "I'd likta know how we stand. Maybe he heard about losin' his job when he got down to

the Settlement, and then went to the village to see about the payments on the jalopy. It's the first thing he'd think about."

When the sun, a big red ball, lay on the horizon, shedding circles of pale rose-colored light, and the zenith was veiled in soft blue tulle, a car was seen skimming along the road that cut through the hemlock-clad valley. "Why, that's Pa in the jalopy Elmer jist took away," cried Geoff. The family waited breathlessly.

Mr. Otter waved breezily as he drove past his family on the verandah to park the car under the grape arbor, which served for a garage. Mrs. Otter hurried through the outside trapdoor, opening directly into the cellar, her destination the cider barrel. A gay cloud of small Otters flew to help Mr. Otter unload the big carton of groceries, into which they dove at once for the paper cone of peanuts and hardtack given away at the Settlement store with every purchase over five dollars.

"Papa, sit down, rest yourself," urged Mrs. Otter. She put him in her comfortable rocker with a dripping tumbler of cider while Geoff went on: "Gee, Pa, Elmer Monger came here this noon and took away the jalopy. How didja ever git it back? You didn't have the money for the payment. Mum did, and she didn't wanna give it to him, seein' how things are."

Mr. Otter took a good swallow of cider, and, as it commenced to warm him up, heaved a sigh of comfort. He regarded his family with lazily smiling eyes, not beyond keeping them in suspense for a while.

"I go to see Mr. Tenney in Settlement to make last payment on Rosie," he said, presently. "Mr. Tenney say he talk to Elmer Monger when Elmer drive through Settlement on way to village. Elmer say he take car because Mamma will not make payment, and he tell Mr. Tenney Rosie get lost in swamp and drown. Mr. Tenney, he very fine fellow, he say to me, you keep ten dollar, it last payment on Rosie, anyhow, and use it to help buy another car." Mr. Otter spoke with great distinctness and sly humor.

At the moment Rosie, who had been milked by William half

an hour before, came ambling across the lawn, announcing her arrival with a contented moo. Mr. Otter, of course, hadn't really believed his family could be so criminally negligent as to let her drown in the swamp. Rosie tossed her head coquettishly, proving how much alive she was, and all the Otters eyed her affectionately. They were very fond of her. Rosie had been one of the family right from the beginning.

"I see Mr. Monger in the village," Mr. Otter went on. "He say Elmer come for money, but Mamma will not give it. Mr. Monger one helluva fine fellow, too, very sorry Rosie get lost and drown in swamp. He say, take car back, pay when you can. Sixteen kids must have milk. You keep twenny dollar payment this month, help buy new cow."

"That means we're sittin' pretty for another month," cried Geoff, "and a month is a long time. So don't you fret about losin' your job, Pa. You'll find 'nother one."

"I did not lose my job," said Mr. Otter, his eyes twinkling. "That big misunderstanding. Next thing Government do in Happy Valley, make big pond, put islands in him, build nice house for the wild duck and the wild goose. Take a year to make anyway. I get inside dope from Government," he added, winking at Geoff.

Mrs. Otter refilled Mr. Otter's tumbler and hovered over him solicitously, as she waited for him to feel the pleasant effects of the drink. It would stimulate her, too, even if she hadn't taken a mouthful.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

The Big Potato Crop

*I*t was a beautiful moon and the breeze was fresh and cool, but the mosquitoes were making the night hideous.

There are never enough mosquitoes to go around when the Otter family are all together, so I resolved to be comfortable and spend

a few hours on the windy hilltop. Moreover, Mr. Otter was giving a concert; the reedy melodies he enticed from his accordion were dancing across Smoky Valley, and sweetening the evening.

The music sounded good from our garden; it would sound even better if I were sitting on my reserved seat, which is the chopping block on the weedy patch the Otters flatter by calling it their front lawn.

Molly padded up to me in her bare feet and piped: "Guess what?"

"What, Molly?" I guessed.

"I ain't gonna tella ya," she retorted.

"But *I'll* tella ya," said Geoff, gloomily, although there was a venturesome look in his eyes. "Calvin got a severe attacked of patriotism and enlisted in the Army yesterday. He draws his last pay from the farm where he works on Saturday."

Geoff's speech, dropped into my lap like a bombshell, was anticlimaxed when Molly, poking her head out from behind Mrs. Otter's rocker, piped: "And them cookies you brunged over Sunday is all et up."

I promised more cookies for Molly, but I couldn't do anything about Calvin's enlistment, except feel proud of him.

Mr. Otter was playing his accordion softly, and smiling to himself. The moon hung low over Smoky Valley, in a night more purple than black, star-flecked by the fireflies swarming over the creek basin on the valley floor. "Well, Calvin make one helluva good soldier for Uncle Sam," said Mr. Otter, proudly, over the reedy notes. "He damn good shot. Go out with three bullet, come back with three rabbit. Waste nothing."

"Well, he won't be shootin' rabbits in the Army," said Geoff. "There'll be 'nother kind of game."

"Or, when he come back with only two rabbits, have one bullet left," said Mr. Otter.

"When does Calvin leave?" I asked.

"In a coupla days," said Geoff, disconsolately. "He's been wantin' ta enlist for a long time. He says it's only a question o' time

before we'll be in the war, and then he'd git drafted anyway. But it's gonna be tough 'round here without Calvin ta help Mum out with a piece o' change now and then, specially now when we owe so much money for all that stuff that got burnt up."

"I only hope Calvin'll go up ta Fort Ontario," said Mickey. "It's sommers not far from here, and he'd be able ta come home Sundays in his soldier suit."

"Will he?" said Geoff. "Will he? When Calvin comes home, we might not be here. We might be sommers else—sleepin' in a pine grove, maybe, or in a stone quarry. We done it before. Them lawyers kin take our house away from us any day now. And jist when we made the last payment on it, and own our own place for the first time!"

Mr. Otter rested his accordion, and looked up at the northern sky. He wasn't even listening. It was just like that gentle soul to dream about a star-studded universe when his family, and especially Mrs. Otter, whose feet were always firmly planted on the ground, had to worry about the debts Lena incurred, and the possible harrowing results if payment was not made.

"Calvin's been running 'round lots with Angelina Merino," said Geoff, thoughtfully. "She's crazy about him. Mrs. Merino's always proposin' to him for Angelina. He oughta marry her and then Mrs. Merino might see that we didn't lose this place. We bought it offen her."

Mrs. Otter picked up Molly and settled the little girl in her lap. Molly, wild and adventurous as she was, often had moments when she quite reverted to babyhood. "Angelina Merino, she not good enough for my Calvin," said Mrs. Otter. "Her head fulla foolish business. Alla time she think dance, dance, good time, good time, alla time she smellink just like da perfume. Smoke like chimpney, too."

Mr. Otter said softly. "Many nice girls smoke."

Mrs. Otter shook her head. She could not approve of girls who smoked. Katy always left her cigarettes at home when we visited Otter Hill. "Me glad Calvin enlisted in Army," she went on, giving

Molly a hug. "Calvin not like William. William settle down easy. William have strong, quiet blood. Calvin have strong, wild blood. Good for him to join army, fight, see world, get wildness out of system. Army cure him."

"That's awright, Mum," said Geoff. "But what about our house? Are we gonna lose it? How about all that money we owe? We can't keep our eyes closed no longer."

"I don't think we lose our house," said Mrs. Otter. "Anyway, me got good potato crop. Two hundred bushel, sell for four hundred dollar, maybe more."

"I *hope* we don't lose our house," put in Mickey. "Winter's comin' on. We can't camp out in winter."

"It only August," said Mrs. Otter. "Winter far away. And if they take my house, they do not take my potatoes, by heck. Tomorrow we pick, everybody help, even baby, have darn good time."

"Oh, diggin' potatoes, Mum," said Geoff. "I'd feel more cheerful diggin' 'em if I knowed we could sell 'em in one lump, steada dolin' 'em out a bushel atta time, and never gettin' any money. Everybody 'round here raises potatoes, they ain't no market for 'em, unless ya have good luck. Sell 'em in one good lump, and we'd have enough money ta make a good dent in our bills that we owe them lawyers."

The Otters' creditors had turned their accounts over to an agency for collection, and Mrs. Otter had already received many terrifying documents, threatening her with the loss of her property if payment was not made.

"Maybe *you* sell potato for me in one lump," challenged Mrs. Otter. "You make good talk, tongue go alla time, like clock handle, should be good salesman. You sell potato for me, I give you ten cents on dollar, O.K.?"

"You never kin tell, I might hafta remember ya not to forgit that promise, Mum," grumbled Geoff. "You know, we got one good prospect."

Although the potatoes were still nestling under ground, the Otters had been trying hard to find a market for them right along. Signs

advertising the crop were tacked on trees and posts in strategic spots all the way to the village. The Otters sought customers at church, the children got the school teacher to work for them, and Mr. Otter's WPA associates promised to help. But who wanted two hundred bushels of potatoes in one lump?

When I asked Geoff who his good prospect was, he brightened.

"Oh, a fella by the name o' Jory. He's a friend of mine. Came out here fishin' all summer, and I been takin' care of him."

Mr. Jory was owner of a chain of restaurants in various towns, and certainly, Geoff thought, he ought to be able to use two hundred bushels of potatoes. Having a sale of their crop in mind, Geoff had purposely cultivated the sportsman's acquaintance.

"Every time he came out here fishin'; and I knowed it, I'd be on hand with a jug o' pa's cider. He usta say that even if he didn't ketch no fish, it was worth whilst travelin' forty miles jist for a drink."

Geoff had shown Mr. Jory the best trout holes in the creek. He dug bait for him. He picked berries for him in the woods to take home. He enlisted Mrs. Otter in his sales campaign, and he saw to it that Mr. Jory got specimens of Mrs. Otter's first tomatoes, cucumbers, turnips and corn, fresh from the big vegetable garden. He told Mr. Jory his famous carp story.

"But I ain't popped the question yet," said Geoff. "And I kinda hate to. Mr. Jory's a nice fella, and I don't want him ta think I jist been nice to 'em so's he'd buy our potatoes. I'd do for him anyway."

Mr. Otter ceased his silent contemplation of the stars, and began to play a little apostrophe to them. Mrs. Otter, who had been on the point of getting up, sat back and relaxed. A look of candid pleasure flooded her big, brown face. It was the first time since four in the morning that her hands were idle. Mr. Otter played on, the music dreamed itself away, the musician put his accordion down and the children knew it was time for bed.

"Roll call, roll call," cried Mickey. Mrs. Otter could tell at a

single glance if any of her brood was missing, but before going to bed at night she went through the formality of a roll call to please them. William, Calvin and Mary were dancing in the village in celebration of Calvin's enlistment (I hoped the boys had a few dollars to buy some drinks), which meant that Mrs. Otter had only thirteen of her brood to account for. She stood up straight, affected a military bearing and called "Geoff," in a clipped voice.

"Present."

"Walter, Alix," barked Mrs. Otter, trying to keep from laughing. "Present," they shouted. "Rosie, Rolf, Jennie, Mickey, Davy, Dennis," snapped Mrs. Otter. "Present."

"Molly, Tessie, Nannie, Coo-Coo." All were accounted for. Dennis put away the accordion, Davy carried in Mrs. Otter's sewing basket, and Mr. Otter took up an armful of babies.

Geoff, Walter and Alix decided it would be fun to sleep in the haypile and, knowing that I was alone for a few days, they invited me to spend the night with them. Mrs. Otter thought it a good idea, too, and she gave me a blanket and a pillow from her green plush parlor suite. I told her if I stayed, I would remain the next day and help dig the potatoes. The children began to undress where they were standing, dropping their clothes in the same place, Mr. Otter dumped his armful of sleeping babies into their beds without undressing them, the kerosene lamp was blown out and a few minutes later only moonlight shone over Otter Hill.

We made our beds in the hay. It was a pleasant place to couch after a musical evening on the breezy hilltop. The boys lay awake, whispering, laughing, and tickling each other with wisps of hay, then dropped off and I could hear their steady, healthy breathing.

It was after midnight when William, Calvin and Mary drove up the hill. They sat on a bench under the grape arbor discussing Calvin's enlistment. It was such a clear evening, I could overhear fragments of their conversation.

"You might just as well get in now as later," he was saying, in his deep young baritone. "Mark my words, we'll be at war with

Japan before the winter's over. But instead of going to Hawaii or the Philippines, I'd rather help drive the Germans out of Czechoslovakia."

"If Ma and Pa hadn't come to America, we'd all be over there," said William, thoughtfully. "And how different everything would be. I suppose we'd all be living in Lidice."

Mrs. Otter had been born in the countryside right outside of Lidice.

My bed was soft and sweet-smelling, and I opened my eyes feeling fresh and rested. The boys must have arisen very quietly. Otter Hill fairly teemed with life under the blazing morning sun. The dry, fragrant wind up there made everything seem wonderfully free. All the children were up, some dressed, some flying around on the lawn half naked, whooping like Indians.

Geoff came out of the kitchen carrying the cider jug. "Mr. Jory's out fishin' today, and I think he'd kinda like ta wet his whistle after the sun's up and it gits hot. I put the jug in the water under the bridge, in a secret place, to keep it nice and cool, and Mr. Jory kin have a little nip any time he wants to." Geoff disappeared down the hillside, just as Calvin came up. He had had a morning plunge in the creek, a practice he kept up until about Thanksgiving.

"Water was cold," he said, showing his fine teeth. "But I might just as well toughen up. They might send me to Alaska."

Calvin had been working on a neighboring farm by the day, but today Mrs. Otter had urged him to help get their own potatoes out of the ground. Everybody worked hard in the blazing hot sun. Davy and Dennis acted as waterboys, operating between the potato patch and the well. After a few hours of rolling around in the dirt between furrows the babies looked like pickaninnies. At noon Mrs. Otter served a cold lunch under the cherry trees, and I drove to the village for ice cream. Mr. Otter came home early to help, and so did Mary, who had gotten herself another job in the village, taking care of children. That night, well over two hundred bushels

of potatoes were piled up in the yard, and what a fine sight they made! The Otters all gathered around, to admire the big crop.

"If we could only sell 'em in one lump," cried Geoff. "Then it woulda been worth while pickin' 'em. Sell 'em in one lump, that's the thing to do. I'd almost drather let 'em rot in the ground than pick 'em and hafta eat 'em ourselves. Gee, how I hate potatoes!" I recalled that the Otters had frequently lived for months at a time on macaroni and potatoes.

Mrs. Otter urged me to stay for supper, after which we sat on the verandah and watched the sunset. The evening star came out, swimming in a little sea of her own brilliance. Otter Hill floated in an infinite sea universe of palest, most tenuous blue. Tonight the family was strangely quiet—although it was an understanding kind of silence. I guessed the Otters, in their hearts, were saying good-by to Calvin, who would be leaving in a day or two.

Geoff made a trip down the hill to fetch the cider jug he had left for Mr. Jory, and upon his return he motioned that he wanted to see me on the side. "Look," he said, "I found this note stuck in the jug, with a five dollar bill."

Mr. Jory had written that he had enjoyed the cider and that Geoff must accept the little present. Mr. Jory didn't know when he could come fishing again, because he had enlisted in the Army, but he hoped to be in the country before long, when he had a day's leave, and then he would see Geoff again. Good-by and good luck until then, said Mr. Jory in his little note.

"He enlisted, too," said Geoff, incredulously. "And he's pretty old, too—he must be at least thirty-five. Mr. Curley," Geoff went on, "if we get put out of our house will you let us use your barn? It's big and roomy and you don't have no livestock in it. I kinda like this neighborhood, and wouldn't wanna move away."

But the tragedy of eviction did not befall the Otters, welcome as they would have been to our barn which, indeed, contained no livestock except an occasional rat and chimney swifts' nests glued against the rafters.

I had to go to town to fetch Katy home, and about a week later I visited Otter Hill again, half fearing that I would see the old truck piled high with household things, and the family ready to resume its wanderings. Instead, I found business going on briskly as usual.

I was encouraged, too, by the radiant smiles I met everywhere. Mrs. Otter stuck her head out of the kitchen window, beaming, gaily wished me good morning and said she was making chili-sauce—and had five bushels of cucumbers to get at next. The children, under Geoff's supervision, were busy grading potatoes, and taking his orders with great docility.

When Geoff saw me, his face lit up and he stopped bossing them around long enough to tell me the news. Mrs. Otter, as if she wanted to hear it all over again, came out to listen, looking so proud of Geoff I plainly saw that he was to be the hero of his own recital.

"Well, Mr. Jory was out here again—he came out specially to see me Sunday morning before church," began Geoff. "First thing he said to me was, 'Geoff, how many children did you say your Ma has got to feed?' 'Sixteen,' I said. 'Well, I got five thousand children to feed,' said Mr. Jory, 'and all of 'em are boys. And what appetites!' 'Holy smokes, Mr. Jory,' I said, 'nobody kin have five thousand children. It ain't natchural.' "

"Well, ta make a long story short," resumed Geoff, after catching his breath, "Mr. Jory's got the same kinda job in the Army as he had before he joined up—feedin' people. He goes 'round, buyin' food for the camp in wholesale lots. And he told me they let him play at being a captain, too—up at the same camp where Calvin is. 'We use plenty of potatoes in the Army,' he said. 'Some of the boys even like home-frieds for breakfast.' "

Geoff's blue eyes were snapping. "The Captain said not to worry 'bout losin' the farm, if sellin' the potatoes'll help any. 'I'll take them potatoes offen your Ma's hands, and give her a good price for 'em too. They'll be a man 'round Monday afternoon ta pick 'em up.' That's today." Geoff tossed his straw hat into the air to show his elation, and some of the boys began to play catch with the biggest potato they could find.

The Otters generously shared their happiness with me. The children simply couldn't wait for the Army to arrive and little Davy kept speculating as to what type of vehicle might come to take the potatoes away—he pictured a sort of tanklike affair, belching smoke and flames, and bristling with machine guns and cannons. But about noontime a big dump truck turned off the dirt road and made the ascent. "Here they are," shouted Geoff, and the entire family, including Mrs. Otter, who was flourishing the wooden ladle with which she stirred up the chili-sauce, came flying out to greet the Army.

A big brown fellow—a soldier—jumped out of the truck and waved to the family.

The Otters could scarcely believe what they saw, and neither could I.

"Why, it's Calvin," cried Mickey.

And indeed it was. He looked splendid in his uniform; bigger and manlier than ever. The family gathered around to exclaim, admire, and wonder. Mrs. Otter was thrilled, but slightly abashed, too, at the sight of her tall son in a soldier's uniform. She hardly knew what to do or say until he ran up to her and kissed her resoundingly, and told her that he was crazy about the army life.

"Captain Jory sent me for the potatoes, Mum—we're takin' two hundred bushels today, and next week any that's left over. Here's the check. Now, you kids," shouted Calvin, just like the sergeant I knew he'd be some day, "get busy and help load the potatoes on the truck. I've got to be on my way to pick up some more. Too bad, Mum, you didn't put in a bigger crop."

In a voice trembling with delight, Mrs. Otter said next spring she'd put in five hundred bushels.

Everybody pitched in and helped and it was only a matter of three-quarters of an hour when Calvin was sitting at the wheel, ready to steer the big truck down the hill.

"Well, Mum," he joked. "You raised the potatoes. I only hope I don't have to peel 'em."

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

The Last Whippoorwill

*L*ate that summer William spent a week trying to find Lena. He combed a string of villages along Lake Ontario she had often visited, and he wound up at Alexandria Bay, where she had once lived.

He stood in front of a picture house in a northern town when Greta Garbo was playing there, hoping Lena would show up—stood there from the time the box office opened until the last performance at nine in the evening. Lena had told William she would walk a hundred miles to see Miss Garbo in that picture.

A touching sight he made when he came home from his unsuccessful quest, carrying my old suitcase, his eyes unhappy and his mouth a little uncertain as he told Mrs. Otter he hadn't found a single trace of Lena. Everybody felt badly; even the little boys and girls (and children can forget so easily) were disappointed. They had all been so sure their big brother would bring Lena home.

"She might at least of sent us a postal card," mourned Geoff.

"I ain't given up Lena yet," said Mickey, faithfully. "She'll come home. You jist wait and see. Lena *liked* us."

In order to satisfy her village creditors, Mrs. Otter had had to borrow from Peter to pay Paul. She had used the four hundred dollars she'd received for the potato crop, and borrowed a larger amount from Mrs. Merino, the former owner of Otter Hill. Mrs. Merino had decided that if the Otters were to lose their home at all, it might just as well be to her, who had sold it to them. Besides, she enjoyed having the family in her debt—it put them in her power and insured a properly subservient attitude from them. Mrs. Merino was something of a dictator, and she hoped she'd be able to dictate a marriage contract to the Otters. She was trying to marry off her troublesome daughter Angelina, and Angelina had eyes only for the two big Otter boys, William and Calvin.

But William thought only of Lena. The Otters pitied him very much, showing him a deference usually accorded to people in mourning. Even Calvin, who had once found Lena so fascinating, and whom he had so distrusted, was very soon on the old affectionate terms with his brother. Calvin came home once or twice a week, and one day, after watching the two big boys go off to the village together, Mrs. Otter told me they weren't boys any more, but grown men, old enough to have wives.

All the men in her family married young, she said. There were many good reasons why men should marry young, probably the most important of all being that an early marriage made it unnecessary for a man to run around with bad women. And if William had wanted to marry Lena as badly as Mr. Otter had wanted to marry *her*, when *they* were young, he must be suffering dreadfully now.

But William wasn't the kind of young man to sit around and mope. He grieved over Lena, and probably for her—I think he felt she hadn't quite proved herself, or justified his act of bringing her to his home. And he had risked much, bringing Lena to Otter Hill. Moreover, it is well enough for folk to share happiness, but when adversity comes along, it should not drive them apart, but bring them closer together. Lena, William thought, hadn't loved the Otters well enough to face adversity with them.

William hired himself out to one farmer after another, and gave all his earnings to his mother. His one thought seemed to be to work as hard as he could. In the evenings and on Sundays he helped Mr. Otter put a new roof and verandah on the house, with lumber salvaged from the flood. The boys—Geoff, Walter and Alix—liked the big tent under the cherry trees so much they went right on sleeping in it, playing at keeping bachelor house, and Mrs. Otter would often make a great pretense of calling on them. The Otters, when they weren't grieving over Lena, or worrying about the money they owed Mrs. Merino, tried to enjoy themselves.

Crops were good at Otter Hill that year. Corn, never too satisfactory in that latitude because of the cool nights and short season,

appeared regularly on the plank kitchen table. Mrs. Otter raised bumper crops of turnips, cucumbers, cabbages, and her big tomato field was constantly raided by the children who snatched the sun-warmed fruits from the plants the minute they were declared ripe, eating them down hungrily before leaving the field, and taking turns with the salt shaker. Blueberries were plentiful and Geoff, Walter and Alix earned enough money picking and selling them to buy winter overcoats. All superfluous cash Mrs. Otter put aside to apply on debts, which nearly killed Geoff, who called it paying for "dead horses." About that time, Geoff had the famous dream which always marked the beginning of a great financial depression for the Otters.

It seemed that he was walking through a field when he saw a silver dollar sticking out of the ground. He picked it up, found another one—still another; then unearthed a great deposit of silver coins.

"Gee, they looked pretty, shinin' 'gainst the dark ground," said Geoff. He dug madly, ecstatically, uncovering silver coins in layers and caches in the brown earth; it was like mining silver, really, and soon he was so loaded down with silver dollars—not only were his pockets stuffed, but his pants legs as well—he couldn't walk.

That was when he woke up. "Every time I have that dream," Geoff told me, "we're broke for a long time afterward. It's allus a sure sign."

Mrs. Otter pickled, preserved, and canned. She not only "put up" every kind of fruit, vegetable and green that she raised on her own place, but even tried her hand with the tasteless, inedible berries she found in the woods: "dog" berries, "cow" berries, and "bull" berries—they were rightly named, she told me, after you tasted the stuff they made; such a waste of sugar. The Otters seemed to be fortifying themselves for what looked like a hard stretch ahead, a winter of self-denial and privation. Meanwhile, they were bent on enjoying life. They didn't believe in throwing away a beautiful summer and fall, just because it looked like a tough winter.

On Sunday afternoons, the family got into Mr. Otter's jalopy, and drove to one of the ponds or small lakes to picnic and bathe. Mrs. Otter never went in the water, but was content to sit on the grass watching the children splash and frolic. They were fearless little water-dogs and some of them didn't hesitate to jump and dive beyond their depth. Dennis could swim twelve strokes more than Davy, which made Davy cry with vexation.

On Saturday nights, William and Calvin took Mary dancing in an open pavilion on the lakeside. Katy and I often drove over just for the pleasure of watching our young neighbors dance under the stars. If the boys found us, they would insist on a dance with Katy, and I would take a turn around the pavilion with Mary. She was usually the prettiest girl on the floor, and William and Calvin stood above the other dancers as tall flowers tower over weeds. There wasn't a girl in the pavilion who didn't angle to dance with the brothers, one of them in soldier's uniform.

When the first whippoorwill sang in early summer, it was the signal for the young Otters to put away their shoes and go barefoot. When it stopped singing in late summer, they started wearing them again.

It was almost a ceremonial thing with them, and Mrs. Otter considered the time favorable, as well, to pile her family into the jalopy and ride to the city, forty miles away, on the annual shopping expedition. This was an occasion as exciting as the Fourth of July, or Christmas, and the children counted the days for it to come.

The Otters spent hours beforehand pouring over the mail-order house catalogue, selecting their winter clothes, underwear, jackets, reefers, boots and shoes—with special emphasis on footgear. The boys all loved good, stout boots for winter wear.

It was normally only an hour's drive to the city, but the Otters always got up early for a good start. Mr. Otter drove slowly so the family could enjoy the scenery, and besides, his tires were usually pretty bad. He had had as many as seven flats on the way in, a distance of some forty miles. The family spent the entire morning

in the basement of a big department store, and at noon marched to a near-by park, to eat the sandwiches Mrs. Otter had packed. After lunch, they returned to the store to complete their purchases. Mrs. Otter let the children pick out their own clothes—or they thought she did—which was the same thing. Their supper—the one yearly occasion when they dined out—they took in a German restaurant in the neighborhood, noted for the great helpings it served. Frugal Mrs. Otter would bring a stout paper bag along, into which she stuffed whatever was left on the table to take home.

It was on this last season's shopping expedition that Mr. Otter, over her many protests, selected a dress for Mrs. Otter, her first new one in seven years. The matter was taken from her hands entirely; everything left to Mr. Otter's own discriminating taste—and on subsequent occasions, when Mrs. Otter put on the dress, she was always so extravagant in her admiration of it, and of Mr. Otter's eye for style and material, it made him feel like a king.

When I saw Mrs. Otter in that new dress, it seemed to me that a leopard had succeeded in changing its spots.

In September Katy and I made a trip to Canada, where she lived before we were married.

We visited Montreal, toured Quebec to look at churches, and then went to see the quintuplets. We knew it would give Mrs. Otter pleasure to get firsthand information about the five little girls. She greatly admired Mrs. Dionne—considering her the greatest woman in the world.

On our way home, we stopped at Alexandria Bay. Katy loved the region of the Thousand Islands, which, like Lena, she had known all her life. During her girlhood she lived within sight of the St. Lawrence, and she was always perfectly happy when she returned to the river.

Late one afternoon we were having dinner on the verandah of a restaurant overlooking the bay. There was a tang of apples and grapes in the air. The wide stream swam in the reflected blue of mid-September skies—skies that were ridden with puffy little

clouds, traveling, like the birds, in flocks. The trees were fresh and green, the lawns sloping to the river sparkling emerald, and the gardens fairly ablaze with color. Even without the glowing fall flowers to identify it—even without sight—one would have felt that this was a northern September, in its most gracious mood.

There was a dock running out into the deep river water, and Katy called my attention to a white craft drawing in toward it. The gangplank was lowered. "Why, that's Lena," said Katy. "She got off the boat. She's coming here."

Believing that Lena wouldn't want to see us, we hid behind our menus while she and her companions passed our table on the verandah and went inside. Then, through a window between the house proper and the verandah on which we were dining, we could see Lena's party without being observed in turn.

The woman—I knew at once she was Lena's mother—must have been beautiful in her girlhood, like the daughter. She had a lovely figure still, and graceful hands and ways. There was a suggestion of cold-storage about her, of the old yellowed fowl—something plucked, dressed, trussed and preserved. Her companion was a harmless-looking creature, a vulgar old man obviously out on a spree.

He was short and fat, had a red, beerish face, wore a brilliant necktie, a square diamond ring and he was acting like a high school boy. He seemed to be trying hard to make Lena's mother laugh, but she treated him with good-natured contempt. Sometimes she gave him a smile for his pains, which seemed to lift him to the clouds, and sometimes she ignored his obvious sallies, whereupon he was correspondingly depressed. Certainly she held the upper hand.

The other man—Lena's companion—was youngish, immensely large, thick-lipped, deeply bronzed. He had a look of dissipated power and bold eyes. His white clothes made him seem very gross. His smile was not unattractive; he wasn't a very nice person, but he certainly didn't look like a vicious one. Evidently, he hadn't known Lena for long. Although the glances he cast on her were

ardent ones, something in his manner suggested that he was still holding himself in. Later on I learned that he was an amateur wrestler and a millionaire as well. What he did besides wrestle nobody was able to tell me.

I plainly remember Lena's tight little face under the blue turban. Everything about her was cool, measured, deliberate: her smiles, her talk, her manner. She knew what she was doing. I got the impression that it was only her attitude which was keeping the party from being a huge success, and that the others were waiting for her to break down. Her companion was pressing her to take brandy, but she demurred. She was a different person, certainly, from the wild, wanton thing William had brought to Otter Hill, and from the lovely, anxious girl Otter Hill had turned her into. Now she seemed to wear a kind of mask, and which girl it concealed, of course I couldn't know; yet it was a mask I could easily penetrate, or, rather one I didn't have to penetrate, since it was so obvious *what* it concealed. Once or twice, as we watched the party, Katy's eyes and mine would meet, and we would quickly look away. Each knew what the other was thinking. One couldn't mistake it. Lena and her mother were out on a trip with these men.

Katy and I, thinking William ought to have a change and a holiday, had urged him to accompany us to Canada, but I'm happy now that he hadn't been able to come. It would have been bad for him to see Lena like that. Now he could go on thinking about her as she had been at Otter Hill, while she stayed there with his family—nothing had been spoiled for him.

After we got home that September, and the Otters talked about Lena, I always felt sorrier for them than I did for her. If Lena had gone back on them—having already become what one suspected, at first sight, lay within her—she ought to have been more careful. She was running a terrible risk, being seen in places like Alexandria Bay, which was only half a day's drive from Otter Hill.

But as the months went by, the sharp image of Lena's controlled, deliberate face as I had looked upon it that day by the river blurred

somewhat. I commenced to think of her again as I knew the Otters thought of her—as one of them in everything they did; and to recall the kind of pictures of her which were fixed in their own memories: Lena working in her first flower garden, so absorbed and so softened; Lena playing the piano for the enraptured family; Lena sitting on the red iron bridge, dropping pebbles on the youngsters frolicking in the stream below; Lena sitting beside Mrs. Otter, helping her shell peas or snip beans, or darn socks for the little boys.

She had always looked so graceful and so hopeful, so plastic and so maidenly—so like a handmaiden to the mother of the young man she loved, and hoped to marry. Otter Hill was a special place because Lena had once graced it, and it owned a hundred special memories of her. In the light of this bequest to the Otters, I sometimes thought that what happened to Lena herself, was of little consequence; and that she might probably have realized it, too.

Still, it was a pity she hadn't stayed on, if for nothing more than to see the garden she had planted come into full bloom. "If only Lena knew how nice her garden was," the Otters were always saying. Some of her zinnias and snapdragons and asters won blue ribbons at the Peeble Creek County Fair.

September and October were mild and sunshiny. I couldn't remember a lovelier fall in the Valley. The late wildflowers were so abundant and fresh, growing in fields as verdant as spring. On Katy's birthday, Calvin, home on leave, brought her a bunch of flowers he had picked in the roadside meadow: asters, white and blue, turtlehead, monkey flowers, bottle gentian, bindweed and bitter nightshade and wild blue phlox. Orchids couldn't have pleased Katy more than this simple offering from young Calvin Otter, put outside our kitchen door in a milk bottle for her to find.

Flocks of bluebirds on their return south stopped to revisit spring and early summer haunts near our house and in our orchard. The forest floors were carpeted thick with wintergreen and partridge berries, and the orange of clambering bittersweet glowed on trees and fences. The sunshine had a pale, golden-washed quality,

and a magic purple haze hung low over the valley in late afternoon. There were so many yellow flowers to complement the blue of bottle gentian and of aster.

With the first cold snaps, the maples turned and made conflagrations against the dark evergreen forests. Then, following a magic, almost unreal interlude of blue and gold weather, the rains came to change everything. One could see the earth brown and darken. The wind, sighing profoundly, whipped up the leaves and sent them dancing in the maddest spirals. The heavy frosts came along, to kill everything the chilling rains had spared but sickened—the last few brave marigolds and snapdragons.

Mr. Otter told me that fall was the saddest part of the year to him. It seemed that all his sorrows had come in fall, and therefore his saddest memories. It was in fall he had said good-by to his parents in the old country, never to see them again. It was in fall that Joey and Johnnie had died; and it was only last October that three-year-old Elsie had had her dreadful accident. That was when she fell into the rosebush.

She had been skipping on the crumbling stone wall on Otter Hill when she tripped and fell—fell directly into the base of a very old rose bush, with spreading branches, bristling with thorns—branches that were almost as tough as iron rods. It was as if the rosebush had seized Elsie, and would not let her go. Her struggles and those of the children to extricate her embedded her only the more deeply in the thorns and she screamed in agony, then hung there, a small thing impaled. Mrs. Otter could do nothing with her hands, tear and lacerate them as she did trying to extricate the little girl by pulling apart the thick, thorny branches that formed what was like a cage around her; and then Geoff had run into the woodshed for the big shears to cut the bush open and get Elsie out. The helpless family stood around the rosebush, with her caught in it, waiting for Geoff to come with the shears.

Mrs. Otter told me she often woke up in the night, seeing Elsie's eyes as they looked when the little girl lay hopelessly tangled in the thorns. While Geoff hunted for the shears, the children, under

Mrs. Otter's leadership, tried to make the little girl forget her predicament. "Sing, Elsie, sing!" they all shouted, laughing and pretending her plight was something funny. They began to sing a song that Elsie loved to pipe when Mr. Otter rocked her on his knee.

"My old man's a gay old man,
Washes his face in the fryin' pan—"

"But you're not singin', Elsie! C'mon, let's start all over again." And Elsie, hanging in the rosebush, lent her quivering little pipe to the chant.

"My old man's a gay old man,
Washes his face in the fryin' pan;
Combs his hair with a wagon-wheel—
Died of a toothache in his heel."

Meanwhile, Geoff had come with the shears and Mrs. Otter cut away the rods that were clasp ing Elsie. She was freed at last, and in Mrs. Otter's arms. Then, suddenly, she had become conscious of herself as all tattered and bleeding, and in terror and in hysteria, she had wrenched herself away from her mother and flown down cellar, locking the door behind her. By the time the Otters had reached Elsie, she was lying in a crumpled, bloody heap on the floor.

Mrs. Otter, the tears rolling down her cheeks as she told me about it, said it was often like that with her children.

They rarely came running to her, like other children ran to their mother, when they were frightened or hurt. They seemed ashamed, and wanted to hide—to spare her extra work or worry or concern. Mickey thought it was dreadful one time when he got sick, and Mrs. Otter, home remedies failing, had to give three dollars to the doctor. He was terribly ashamed of himself, and didn't get over it

for months. He still spoke stoutly of it, saying, "Ma, do you know them there three dollars? Well, some day, I'm going to—"

Mrs. Otter told me she never knew how many of her children went to bed with headaches, sideaches and stomach aches she was not aware of. Often, she would find a scar on the body of one of the boys, without ever having known about the original injury or lesion of which it was the result.

If I hadn't heard about Elsie, I would have considered it just as likely for a man to die of a toothache in his heel as for a child to die of a rosebush.

One afternoon that fall I found Mr. Otter sitting on the verandah in the pale sunshine, playing his accordion and singing the national air of Czechoslovakia in a low voice:

*"Kde domov muj? Kde domov muj?
Voda huci po luci nach—" **

I went away before he saw me. Even the cluster of children I joined in the yard seemed to realize that Mr. Otter was feeling sad.

By the first of December, there were already several snowfalls, and by the fifteenth, winter was ushered in for good. Mrs. Otter had taken the portrait of Lena from her parlor, where the air became glacially cold, and put it on a shelf in the kitchen. But the Otters really didn't need a picture of Lena to remind them of her.

* "Where is my home? Where is my home?
Waters, through its meads are streaming—"

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

Christmas Cactus

*T*he Otters were mourning over their Christmas cactus plant, as if it were a dear corpse.

Molly, thinking the pink buds might taste like the candies they

resembled, had picked and eaten every one of them and now the plant was quite denuded. All the small Otters had gazed upon that plant as if it were something quite as good for the palate as for the eye, but none had ever ventured so far as Molly.

For punishment, she was banished to a spot on a bundle of rags behind the kitchen stove, and when I came in, she was peering tearfully, if not altogether contritely, from this prison into the smoky kitchen.

There were plenty of spruce and hemlock trees in the thick woods below Otter Hill to take the place of the Christmas cactus, which the Otters prominently displayed on their kitchen table during the holiday season (when Mrs. Otter managed to bring it to showy bloom) but, as Mickey put it, "Now what good's a Christmas tree, without no Christmas balls on it?"

"I don't think Christmas is gonna 'mount ta much 'round here this Christmas," Geoff said, quite pleasantly. "I guess the big bad wolf hangin' 'round our door'll scare old Sanny Claus away for good. Jist our luck that Molly et up the cactus buds so we ain't got no Christmas plant ta look at, and that after I earn two dollars shovelin' snow in the village I gotta spend it on the dentist'."

Geoff removed a towel wrapped around his head and grinned as he displayed his right cheek, swollen to twice its natural size. I offered to drive him to the village to fetch some toothache drops, but he said, "I tried everything, even horse liniment, but it didn't do no good. This here tooth's gotta be yanked out."

Mrs. Otter, who was baking that day, washed the bread dough from her hands and spoke cheerfully as she turned to the window, gazing down upon the desolate splendor of the snow-choked valley that lay below Otter Hill.

"Well, it *look* like Christmas, anybody," she remarked. "Everything nice and white, plenty of snow for Sanny Claus to drive reindeer." It was her turn to grin now, and her grin was quite as infectious as Geoff's. The small Otters had never believed in Santa Claus; even little Molly was convinced he was a big humbug. Mr. Otter kept busy on the WPA project, William had hired out at

Mrs. Ashley's farm for the winter, and Calvin gave Mrs. Otter part of his soldier's pay every month. Still, every cent the family earned was swallowed up by their debts. There wouldn't be much of a Christmas at Otter Hill this year; ordinarily, the Otters didn't believe in spending money for pleasure when they had bills to pay.

"Mum's got twenny-five dollars, but Mrs. Merino's comin' today ta collect," said Geoff. "Then we'll be practically broke, because Pa don't git paid again till after Christmas. William either."

"If Ma could keep the twenny-five dollars, we could have a Christmas tree with real Christmas balls on it, and maybe a nice fat goose to eat. I'd start fastin' right now, ta work up an appetite." There was a far-away look in Mickey's blue eyes.

"Good old Sanny Claus," said Geoff. "D'ya know what I'd likta do? I'd likta put a big caldron under the chimney, and when he comes down on Christmas Eve, ketch him in it and cook him up for our Christmas dinner, he's so nice and plump and rosy."

"I think he'd taste good roasted," said Alix, with interest. "Roast him good, and then stick an apple between his teeth, and he'd look jist like a pig, wouldn't he? I allus thought he looked like an awful hog, anyways."

"But first I'd take his boots offen him and keep 'em till I was big 'nough to wear 'em," said Mickey—and the twins Davy and Dennis looked frightened at the very thought of it. They didn't believe in Santa Claus, either, but they were terribly afraid of him.

"Why don't cha write him a letter, Mickey?" asked Alix. "Ask him ta bring anything ya want. Ask him to bring us a Christmas tree, and a turkey with all the trimmins."

"Personally I'd rather have a nice plump goose," said Geoff, longingly. "Now you gimme a goose every time. Goose is jucier'n turkey, and you kin keep the fat, ta grease your boots with, if you got the boots, which I ain't."

Mrs. Otter stepped into the woodshed and picked up a huge Hubbard squash. She split it open with the ax, and while she was scraping out the seeds, Geoff looked about him craftily and said in a low voice: "Fellas, I got an idea. I gotta good mind to pull this

tooth myself. Then I'd be able to keep my two dollars, and at least we could buy some candy, nuts and oranges for Christmas."

"It'll hurt," said Jennie.

"But not any more'n the dentis'," said Rolf.

"Oh, I don't care if it hurts a little. What I want's a good piece o' string, so's not to botch the job," said Geoff, looking about him. He pulled a tough string from the heap of rubbish under the stove. "I might as well do it myself steada givin' good money to the dentis'," he added. The boys, extremely interested, gathered around, and even the babies watched from their hot spots behind the stove, quite fascinated. Geoff tied one end of the string to his aching tooth, and the other end to the doorknob. I felt acutely uncomfortable, thinking he meant to ask me to complete the operation by slamming the door shut. At the moment, however, it was flung open from the outside, Geoff's tooth flew out of his face with almost interstellar speed and Mrs. Merino stalked into the room with her customary proprietary air. Her sharp eyes at once took in the situation and she exclaimed briskly:

"Geoff Otter, I pulla tood for you, now you giva me two dollar, like dentis'."

Geoff looked scared, coughed, then looked extremely pleased to realize it was all over. "Gee, Mrs. Merino," he gulped, "the only reason I wanted ta pull the tooth myself was so's I wouldn't hafta give my money to the dentis'. I wanna spend it on candy, nuts and oranges for Christmas."

When Mrs. Otter returned to the kitchen a moment later, she seemed very proud of Geoff for being so brave and gave him her big red handkerchief to spit the blood in. She merely nodded to Mrs. Merino, and then stepped into the woodshed again, returning with a pitcher of fragrant cider which she practically waved under the Italian woman's nose. Fetching a tumbler from the shelf, she removed a bunch of keys, several buttons, safety pins and clips for which it had served as depository, filled it up with cider and placed it, without a word, at the table next to Mrs. Merino—whose face immediately assumed a very crafty expression.

"Oh, no, Meta Otter," she cried. "You no maka me drunk *thisa* time. Fool me onct, but no fool me twiced."

"Maria Merino," said Mrs. Otter, as she stooped to put the squash into the oven, "this Christmas time, me need some change for buy presents for children. Maybe sober, maybe drunk, but you take twenny-five dollar from me this month, you take from my dead body."

Mrs. Merino commenced pounding the table so hard it shook the house, and the children watched her with great interest.

She was a huge woman, with sparkling hazel eyes, a skin like tanned leather, store teeth, and a black head of hair adorned with a rhinestone comb. Her red calico dress lit up the dim kitchen like a flare in a cavern, and she usually resembled a firecracker with a sizzling fuse attached. "Meta Otter," she cried, "you giva me twenny-five dollars *thisa* month, or I pitcha you and kid out in middle of ditch!"

"And what happen then?" returned Mrs. Otter, easily. "House fall apart. At least, me keep him together for you. Me do you favor in first place when me buy old shack. When me come here, only snake and rat live in house. When me go, snake and rat come back. If you like him better for tenant, throw me out in ditch, by golly, and take house back!"

"Besides that, the chimney's gotta be fixed and we hafta buy new bricks to do it," put in Mickey. "This house ain't never been the same since the storm. But o' course I amit the storm wasn't your fault," he conceded, magnanimously.

"If the chimney ain't fixed, Sanny Claus won't be able to come down it, and that would be terrible, wouldn't it, Mrs. Merino?" said Geoff, winking at me over the Italian woman's shoulder.

"Yes, me keep twenny-five dollars this month," said Mrs. Otter, evenly. "You wait for money this time, get it New Year's maybe. You rich like Rockefeller, anyhow, Maria Merino. Have money to burn."

"That will be vera nize, vera nize," purred Mrs. Merino, looking very dangerous. But at the moment William came in from the

parlor where he had put a log in the stove, and she immediately changed the purpose of her visit. Her eyes lit up greedily as she tackled him.

"William," she boomed, "pretty soon it tima for you taka wife. My Angelina, she maka good wife for you. She gotta five hundred dollar in bank, and I giva her lot for bungalow. Angelina vera nize girl. Little wild now, but you tama her, and she settle down, maka good wife."

"Oh shucks, Mrs. Merino," cried Geoff, promptly declining the proposal for his brother, "William's gotta stay home for a long time yet and help Mum 'round the place. He don't go out much with girls 'cept when he's feelin' a little sociable. Besides, William had a girl onct that had twenny-five hundred dollars. Five hundred ain't so much."

"You keepa big mouth shut," hissed Mrs. Merino. "William speaka for himself. Plenty old enough."

"I think Angelina's a nice little girl, Mrs. Merino, but there's somebody else I like better," said William, with dignity.

"You mean that Lena?" snorted Mrs. Merino. "Well, you taka from me, that girl do you biga favor when she go away. Chase after her, you damn fool. She plant the flower, she water the flower, play the piano, do the fancy work, afraid to get hand dirty. That no kinda wife for man to have."

William picked up Nannie and put her in his lap. He rubbed his chin against her face, and she squealed with delight. "I'm old enough to pick out my own women, Mrs. Merino," he said, "but thanks for being so interested."

"Say, Mrs. Merino, if William marries your Angelina, and takes her offen your hands, will ya cancel the five hundred dollars Mum borrowed from you? After all, it would all be in the fambly. How 'bout it?" cried Geoff, his eyes sparkling.

Mrs. Merino throw back her head and roared. Cold-blooded bargaining like that suited her. She looked at Geoff with respect, then exploded with laughter again.

Mrs. Merino's trips to Otter Hill, like mine, were always ad-

ventures. Sometimes she got her money, and sometimes she didn't, but she always had a lot of fun. She was really very fond of the Otters, and I'm sure she would have canceled their obligations to her gladly, and made a generous mother-in-law if one, or both, of the big Otter boys married into her female-ridden family. Certainly a hard-working young man like William was a big catch; and moreover, he was handsome and agreeable and kindhearted. Even the village belles from the best and richest families, some of whom had been his classmates at school, did not succeed in looking convincingly disdainful when William passed them by on the village streets wearing his patched blue overalls, and probably smelling a bit of the cow barn.

Mrs. Merino fixed her glittering eyes on William. "Anyway, you taka Angelina to dance Saturday night in grange hall? She wanta go very much, and she raise hell if nice boy no ask her. Maka everybody in house sick." Mrs. Merino looked so calculating, I guessed she wasn't beyond hoping that William would compromise Angelina. Any kind of weddings for her daughters, even of the shotgun variety, suited her.

William hugged and kissed the baby. He looked at Mrs. Merino with eyes that smiled, but his lips were serious. "I'd like to take Angelina to the dance, Mrs. Merino, but you see, dad's jalopy won't hold out that far. The tires are all shot. And I can't take a girl to a dance without a car, can I? Pretty soon Dad won't even have a decent car to take him to work, and then where'll we be?"

"Maybe Calvin'll take her," said Geoff, hopefully. "He ain't so particular who he goes out with, anyway. Calvin's coming home Saturday night on leave. Most likely he'll come in a car that he borrowed up in Watertown, and then again maybe he'll come by bus."

"Calvin or William, it maka no difference who take Angelina to dance," cried Mrs. Merino, glaring at Geoff. "Angelina, she not so particular either." The Italian woman turned to her hostess. "You keepa twenny-five dollar thisa month, buy new tire and William taka Angelina to dance. Don't you forget that, William

Otter," shouted Mrs. Merino, shaking her finger at the youth in what was almost a threatening gesture.

"Maybe Calvin and I both will take her, Mrs. Merino," said William, smoothly. "And I think that'll please her very much, don't you?"

Mrs. Merino drained her tumbler and then, as if she already regretted her generous concession, and was unable to remain longer at the scene of it, got up and flew to the door, overcome with emotion. She had succeeded in working herself up into a very enjoyable rage. Without further farewells, she went out and slammed the door, and a cluster of small Otters flew to the window to watch her lumbering descent of the hill.

Snowflakes curled and eddied around the shack, and the wind that roared through the pines shook the walls and made the old timbers creak. Outside, the bare vines scraped against the house and the windows rattled in the blast. When Mrs. Merino was out of sight, the children gathered around the stove again.

"Well, William, we saved the day," said Geoff. "Now we got twenny-seven dollars ta spend for Christmas. That is, if Mum's willing ta spend her twenny-five like I am my two," he added, teasingly and winningly, catching Mrs. Otter by her apron string and tweaking it. "After all, we only live onct, and it's a shame ta let Christmas go by without enjoying it."

"And who knows what next Christmas will bring?" said the scholarly Walter. "With Pearl Harbor and all? Calvin probably will be far away, and maybe William, too."

There was a little silence in the kitchen. Only the irregular ticking of Mrs. Otter's alarm clock could be heard. It lay on its side on the shelf—that was the only way it would function.

"Me spend every penny of twenny-five dollars on Christmas, by golly," cried Mrs. Otter, recklessly. "We have nice Christmas, maybe last one on Otter Hill anybody, before Mrs. Merino take him away from me. We have turkey *and* goose: one bird not big enough for eighteen mouths. Eat plenty for Christmas, even if me starve in New Year."

Mrs. Otter's decision was warmly applauded, and Geoff spoke: "Gee, I'm gonna start fastin' right away ta work up an extry appetite. Now, don't you gimme too much supper tonight, Mum. Jist a disha oatmeal'll be plenty. Christmas is only four days away."

Molly, realizing that her crime and banishment were things of the past, ventured to creep out from behind the stove and Fluffy, on whose back she had been resting her head, followed her and stood up in the center of the kitchen stretching his long back.

Fluffy cocked his silky spaniel ears, waved his gay collie's plume, shook his airedale body that stood so high on his tall Russian wolfhound legs, and with his yellow beagle eyes adored the Otter family, who had rescued him from the local pound. He seemed to know, too, that it was going to be a merry Christmas.

Mary and I had been visiting in the front parlor, which opened directly from a little hall off the kitchen, and I was able to hear every word between Mrs. Merino and the Otters. As I was saying good-by to them the kitchen door flew open again and Calvin burst in on a surprise visit to his family.

He was all flushed with cold and his eyes sparkled and his cheeks shone red. He kissed Mrs. Otter, picked up an armful of children and hugged them. "Captain Jory sent me to Cedarvale on business with the truck, Mum, and I stopped here first—it's a short cut, you know. How's everybody? Can you stand the sight of me so soon again?"

Calvin put a letter in Mrs. Otter's hand. "Met the postman at the foot of the hill," he said.

"That's Lena's handwriting," shouted Geoff, and the family gathered around.

Even Calvin looked interested. Mrs. Otter tore open the blue envelope and gave the letter to Mary to read. "Read it out loud," said Mrs. Otter, while the family, collectively, held its breath.

Lena's letter was brief, almost businesslike. She simply said she was very well, and that she hoped the Otters were well, too. There

was a piece of blue paper in the letter—a postal money order. “Enough to cover everything,” Lena had written. “And some left over. I wish Mr. Otter would buy four new tires for his car, so he doesn’t have to change them so often on the road. It’s too cold to do that now. The tires will be my Christmas present to him. Sincerely your friend, Lena.”

Mrs. Otter’s face was glowing. “Me tell you Lena not forget us,” she said, holding the thin blue paper in a trembling hand.

“Where does Lena live?” piped Molly.

“We don’t know, do we?” said Alix. “There’s no address on the letter. The envelope is postmarked Montreal.”

“When’s she comin’ home?” asked Davy.

“She didn’t say when in her letter.”

William had crossed over to the window, and was looking out on the snowy scene that lay below Otter Hill. I couldn’t see his face. The babies were all quiet now, and there was a little hush in the kitchen. Over the wave of radiant happiness there rode the tiniest cloud. The sensitive children all felt it.

“William, now you won’t hafta go out with Angelina if you don’t want to,” said Geoff, breaking the silence. “Mum kin pay Mrs. Merino and tell her to go to the blazes. You, too, Calvin.”

“What’s this?” said Calvin.

“We stalled off Mrs. Merino this month by promisin’ her you’d take Angelina to the dance, or maybe William. Besides, what would Hilda Greenwood say if she knew you went out with Angelina Merino?”

Calvin grasped Geoff under the shoulders, and, big as he was, lifted him clear up to the ceiling in his powerful young arms. All the children started clamoring “me too, me too,” and Calvin lifted them all up and down while they shrieked with joy. “It won’t be a hardship to take Angelina to the dance, Geoff,” he said. “That girl can dance like a fool. And don’t you worry about Hilda. I can take care of two girls at once all right.”

“Calvin’s got two girls, William’s got none,” murmured Geoff, sympathetically.

William wasn't going to spoil anybody's Christmas. "Calvin's welcome to Angelina and Hilda," he said lightly.

"And first thing we know he'll be married to one of 'em," said Geoff, flatly. "Well, Hilda's not so bad but Angelina's got an awful disposition, jist like her mother, even if she has got five hundred dollars in the bank. Don't you ever bring her here, Calvin. You wouldn't ketch her sleepin' in the barn, like Lena did."

"You certainly know a lot about girls, Geoff," said Calvin, winking at me. "How old are you? Thirteen? In another year or two you'll have a girl yourself, and I'll bet you'll pick out a beauty."

"Oh, Mum's the only girl I ever want," said Geoff, and Mrs. Otter flushed with delight. "Still, I like Lena. Poor girl," he added. "She don't know we found that money she thought got burnt up on old Corry and that it's on desposit in the village bank. I hope she didn't hafta go out of her way to get this blue slip."

I drove through the frozen countryside back to the city, wondering if William, who had turned his face away while Mary read Lena's letter, suspected that Lena might have had to *go out of her way* to get that money. I only prayed that her life wasn't going to be a succession of the kind of men Katy and I had seen her with at Alexandria Bay in September.

The only consolation I felt was that there would be happiness for Lena in that the family which had inspired her to do a thing like that would always stay with her, be a part of her life. People do not make great sacrifices unless they love very much. I would have pitied Lena the more if she had valued herself too highly to find a way to help the Otters. Whatever happened to Lena, whatever she became, she would often return to Otter Hill in her thoughts to be refreshed and consoled.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

The Winter Home

Mrs. Otter dug up the newspapers wedged under the door to keep out the ferocious cold, and a second later a wild blast of wind, accompanied by a whirl of snowflakes, swept me into the kitchen.

"Twenty-five below plenty cold, by golly," she exclaimed, as I blew in past her. She gave me a chair in front of the oven, then hurried to stuff the newspapers under the door again. From behind the stove, which was making greedy coughing noises, as if it couldn't gobble up fast enough the green wood Mrs. Otter fed it, six small Otters watched me in bright-eyed expectancy, waiting for something good. (There's hardly a tree within sight of Otter Hill that isn't in danger of being cut down one day, and made to help appease the voracious February appetite of that stove the next.) I put down the basket of oranges and grapefruit Katy had sent the Otters, and the boxes of cakes, nuts and candied fruits.

It was the extra layer of underclothes, shirts, sweaters and jackets the children wore that made them look so fat. Mrs. Otter's old bearskin coat, made of the animal Mr. Otter had found dead (of old age, presumably) in the mountains of Pennsylvania twenty years ago, was hanging over the north kitchen window to keep out the wind. The cold came up from the floor, too, and frigid spirals of breeze danced and eddied down from the ceiling. The windows wore a thick coating of frost.

Winter swoops savagely down upon Otter Hill. January pitches big white tents on the wide beleaguered slopes, and February sends along the deepest drifts for reinforcements. Then the wild cavalry of March winds charges down upon the shack that seems to remain standing only because it doesn't know which way to fall. The Otters, good carpenters all of them, right down to Mickey, who can tack

on a board as well as anybody, wanted to build a real weather-proof dwelling on the exposed hilltop some day. With all the repairs they had been able to make, the old house, so sadly twisted by the storm that ripped off the roof, was never the same again.

Besides the cluster of children toasting themselves behind the stove, there was a cluster of little Otters struggling for possession of the couch, and still another gathered around the plank table, looking at pictures in a mail-order house catalogue of things they wanted but seldom got: one of the family's chief winter diversions. I observed that the youngsters lingered longest over the colored plates; the kitchen was so drab and cheerless in winter, they were as naturally drawn to color as one is drawn to a warm stove on a cold day. Geoff came in from the shed and poured cold water on his near frozen hands to help thaw them out. He wore overalls and high boots, and a belt around his waist with a hammer tucked under it. "I don't mind freezin'," he said cheerfully. "It's the thawin' out that hurts a fella."

Dennis, whose nose had a frostbitten look, trotted over to Mrs. Otter and whispered something in her ear. She grinned and said, "Sure, sure," and Dennis bashfully announced that he wanted to show me the funny thing that had happened to their clothes. He led me out into the woodshed.

There hung a dozen lengths of rope supporting the family wash. All the items—shirts, underwear, dresses, nightgowns, pillow cases and sheets and towels—were peppered with holes the size of tea-cups. "What big moths you have around here, Dennis," I said.

"They ain't moths," said Dennis. "But deer."

Mrs. Otter had done the wash Monday morning, as usual. It had stormed the night before and she found her wash line buried in a snow drift. Not at all dismayed, she had stretched her laundry on newspapers on top of the good clean snow to dry. It would freeze, she knew, and then she would bring it into the house where it would thaw, making it just damp enough for ironing.

A flock of deer, coming out of the woods, had climbed the back path up Otter Hill to the barnyard, where they had walked all

over the Otter laundry as it lay on the snow, perforating the frozen cloth with their sharp hoofs. It was a minor tragedy, but one from which the Otters had by now fully recovered.

The snowflakes were sifting out of the gray sky . . . the lonesome twitter of the sparrows in the snow outside the window added to the sense of desolation . . . the wind was rising and in the distance a dog bayed mournfully. Walter sat in a window, reading a story to Jennie, who was the only Otter willing to listen, and I recognized some lines from *St. Augustine the Hospitaller*. "In winter he watched the snowflakes fall," read Walter, "and had stories read to him." There was a copy of the *Odyssey* on a kitchen chair, and on the slip of paper he had used for a bookmark, Walter had written: "*A man who has not read the Odyssey is like a man who has never seen the ocean.*" Jennie trotted over to my side and showed me a box. "What's inside, Jennie?" I asked.

"There's nothing in it," she said, surprised at my question, and I remembered. The lovely box Jennie clutched in her thin little hand was quite enough: it was a purple velvet box, lined with shining satin. Walter had found it sticking out of the village ash can in which refuse from the Durston mansion was dumped. Jennie took it to bed with her and sometimes held it all night. "Where's my box?" is the first thing she'd say in the morning.

William had been shoveling snow off the sagging roof. I must have looked cold, for he spoke apologetically: "We don't always have it so cold here. It's only when it goes down to ten below that—"

"Why, it's been ten below since Christmas," said Geoff, as if William had cast an aspersion upon the qualities of temperature in this rugged countryside. "It's twenty-five below now, and liable to stay that way 'nother month."

I shivered. The wind whistling around the chimney and rocking the big pines was the coldest sound I had ever heard. Suddenly there was a pounding at the door. Mrs. Otter hurried to dig out the newspapers stuffed under it, and Mr. Otter was blown into the kitchen. Mrs. Otter got him fixed in a rocker in front of the stove,

pulling off his heavy boots and sticking his feet into the oven—all this before he had taken off his red woolen stocking cap. Relaxed and comfortable at last, he beamed as he rubbed his hands together and cried,

"It so cold outside, the stars are jingling!"

Jennie tried to peer through the frosted window to watch the stars make symphonic music. But the only sound in the dead, frozen world below Otter Hill was the wailing of a distant locomotive, which was like the voice of the buried countryside, calling from its deep grave.

Fluffy lay asleep under the stove, and three kittens were playing a game of hide-and-seek in the woodbox. The teakettle whistled contentedly, the stew in its iron pot was bubbling and gurgling like a deposit of hot lava. A vast roaring shook the house, and thick swirls of snow beat against the windowpanes.

With the kitchen walls and ceiling mercifully veiled by dusk, and the loose, softening shadows formed by the straggling light of the kerosene lamp, in which the faces of the small Otters bloomed faintly, like quivering rosy flowers, the room took on a bare illusion of beauty. If only it hadn't been so cold!

Molly and Tessie were upstairs in bed, and Mrs. Otter asked me to visit them. They lay arm in arm, mouth to mouth, breathing softly upon each other, sending little wisps of golden hair floating up and down. The biggest bed was the one in which Mary and Jennie slept together, a happy arrangement, for Mary was the only sister whose bed fastidious little Jennie would consent to share. The little canopy bed occupied a corner of the room, and Nannie was its present occupant.

The Otters were very proud of that canopy bed. Mr. Otter had made it when his first boy, Leftie, was born—twenty-five years ago down in Pennsylvania. He had copied it, in miniature, from a bed he'd seen in a splendid house in the old country. Over the four cherry posts, Mary had put a canopy of cheese cloth, and inside the canopy she had sewn little silver stars and a crescent moon she cut out of a piece of silver cloth.

When Nannie woke up, and looked at the pale stars and the crescent moon she tried to reach for them. "Look, Nannie's reaching for the moon," the children would say. There were six stars in all, formed like the constellation Corvus, twinkling up at the bright star Spika.

"One star for Nannie, one for Coo-Coo, one for Molly, one for Jennie, one for Davy and one for Denny, but none for Fluffy, because he's a bad dog and doesn't get anything at all," the children would sing.

Next to the canopy bed, the Otters loved the big picture of the wedding party. It hung over the bed Molly and Tessie shared, and like Jennie's satin-lined box, had been fished out of that treasure-trove, the Durston ash can.

Even Mr. Otter loved to look at the picture, it was so gay. It showed a wedding party moving through a wood. The party was led by three green frogs beating drums, followed by two mice, wearing red jackets and blowing silver trumpets. The bride was a little red fox, on the arm of her father. She wore a white veil, and carried a bunch of pink flowers. Her father was tall and dignified, and he sported a handsome plume of a tail.

The bridal train was carried by two chipmunks, and behind them came the Stork family. Mr. Stork was a tall thin person, with an important look about him. He wore a white waistcoat and striped trousers, and Mrs. Stork, who was very fat and equally imposing in looks, wore a purple gown trimmed with a handsome fur collar. The ushers were two sandpipers, two thrushes, and two bluejays. They seemed very conscientious about their duties. A silver fox and his wife followed, and the procession was brought up in the rear by a reindeer and a brown bear—evidently two bachelor gentlemen. They too were handsomely attired, and seemed extremely pleased to be going to somebody else's wedding.

One time Molly had piped: "Where's the baby, Pa?" Mr. Otter had had to explain that weddings came first, and babies afterward; and Molly had wanted to know why.

The wind howled louder up in the bedroom, and the storm seemed

so much nearer. The breath of the little girls smoked. I shouldn't have been surprised to find icicles hanging from the rafters. When I thought of big, roomy Red Maples down the road, I felt guilty. It was empty now. Katy and I should have asked the Otters to fill our house up with themselves this winter and be comfortable and warm.

When I got down into the kitchen, Mr. Otter was completely thawed out. He looked at Mrs. Otter, who had drawn her chair up to the oven and was mending socks, in a gently smiling way and remarked, almost meditatively:

"This nice house in summer, but in winter, only fit for polar bear. Today I buy new house in Happy Valley."

Despite that cataclysmic revelation, Mrs. Otter went on knitting and rocking in her chair. With Geoff and some of the boys around, it wouldn't be necessary for her to ask a single question.

"Buy a house, Pa?" cried Mickey, all eyes and mouth. "What didja use for money?"

"Oh, I give note fifty dollar for him," said Mr. Otter, easily. "Pay ten dollars every month."

Geoff spoke up in disgust, "Oh, shucks, Pa, what kinda house kin ya buy for fifty dollars? This one costs three hundred with the stove thrown in and it was a gyp at that. Lookit how cold it is in winter."

Mr. Otter grabbed Geoff, mussed his thick golden hair, and then offered him a drink of elderberry wine from his own glass. Out of politeness Geoff took a sip and waited for Mr. Otter to go on.

"Nice big house," Mr. Otter told him. "Eight rooms."

"How many baths, Dad?" said William. Everybody laughed and looked at William appreciatively for having made a joke. William seldom laughed these days.

"Well, there must be a hitch to it somewhere," said Walter. "Have I ever seen the house? It isn't haunted, is it?" he added, hopefully.

Mr. Otter turned to Mrs. Otter, who had put down her socks to bend over the stew pot, adding potatoes and carrots and listening

with all her ears. "Many houses condemned to make room for dam in Happy Valley for the wild duck and the wild goose to come and live. Houses must come down. Government buy up land from people, sell houses for lumber. House I buy have good lumber in him."

"But shucks, Pa, we can't move the house all the way from Happy Valley to Otter Hill, like Mrs. Greenwood moved hers in the village," cried Geoff. "It would cost a million bucks. Happy Valley and Smoky Valley are fifteen miles apart."

"Do not have to move house from Happy Valley to Otter Hill," said Mr. Otter. "We move to Happy Valley. Live in house till spring, when she get pulled down. Not so cold there. Near to my job, too, and I don't have to take the jalopy. Besides, Mamma should not be very cold this winter."

Of course, I knew what Mr. Otter meant by that. Mrs. Otter was going to have a baby in the spring. Lena, her name would be, if it was a girl that came; Mrs. Otter told me that one way or another, she was determined to have a Lena in the family.

After I said good-by to the Otters, I sat in my car a few minutes, looking about the hillside.

The chimney sent up the faintest curl of smoke against a sky that, having partly cleared, glittered, in patches, with golden points of light. Below the hill the valley was blanketed in fresh, fragrant snow. It made the world seem like a Gothic cathedral; the moon making fleecy white the banked roof of the sky, and Sirius, hanging over the horizon like a vigil light. But the house on the hillside with its bare vines flapping in the wind only made the scene look all the lonelier.

It had almost seemed like desertion when Katy and I flew back to the city after the first sign of cold weather, leaving the Otters behind to face the winter on their bleak hilltop. They really had come to depend on us a little, for company, and for small things we were able to do for them.

Nothing caused Katy more chagrin than to be out of the par-

ticular staple they would have liked to borrow. She could tell just what it was Mrs. Otter needed by the youngster whom she sent over for it. Mrs. Otter would never send Geoff over to us for butter, for instance; Geoff hated butter, and always had.

Walter always came for that, with a little crock to put it in. Evidently, the children made a game of it, and each had his errand to perform when Mrs. Otter ran out of certain items and hadn't the time to send to the village for them. When Katy saw Mickey waddling across the lawn like a duck, she knew it was salt Mrs. Otter had run short of. Rosie came for sugar, Geoff for coffee, Davy and Dennis for flour, Jennie for tea and Rolf for vinegar.

How rich the returns had been! That summer at Red Maples, I think, was the happiest of my life. I had been restored to my wife and quite suddenly we had been blessed with a family, not only one child, but with sixteen of them—all beautiful girls and boys. Even the memory of a dead boy—Leftie—had been bequeathed to us to evoke our mourning. As anecdote concerning Leftie piled on anecdote, I began to know him as well as I knew Geoff or Mickey. The Otters had shared something precious with me, something that ordinarily is not communicable. And I believed it was because they had so completely captivated my heart, my mind and my imagination, making me entirely forgetful of myself, that my health was eventually completely restored. Just when I needed them the Otters had come into my life.

One day late in fall, I had climbed up Otter Hill and prepared to ascend the verandah steps leading up to the kitchen door.

My left foot was on the ground, my right on the first verandah step. I was still not a well man, although a vastly improved one. There were no more drugs, no more utterly sleepless nights. The nameless tides of physiological terror, the dark vague apprehensions and nightmares that used to shudder through my frame and race my heart as if driven by a Diesel engine—they came only in mild, bearable form. Yet, at the moment, with one foot on the ground, and one on the first verandah step, I was still standing knee-deep in a miasmatic swamp (a swamp that had once come up

to my waist) whose poisonous clouds rolled off, enveloping my head and shoulders, darkening everything. Then I lifted my left foot from the ground, put it next to my right on the verandah step. In that second, a miracle had occurred. The swamp oozed away, the miasma cleared—all apprehension vanished. The last of the weight lifted from my shoulders and the poisonous clouds rolled away. My spirits suddenly were as wonderfully light as my shoulders. I bounded up the rest of the steps, wanting to fly again. I was my own man once more. In the kitchen the Otters, seeing my face as it must have been at that moment, looked surprised—as if they had had nothing to do with it. . . .

After the blizzards came, and the city itself shivered, I often conjured up visions of Otter Hill, wondering how it was with the family on their wintry hilltop. People who live in desolate countryside like that all through winter should own weather-proof houses, with warm rooms, red carpets on the floors and bright lamps glowing in the nighttime—a blazing fireplace, a table near by with a decanter of port, brandy, fruit in baskets and flowers spilling spicy fragrance about, to make the snow-laden winds helpless and envious.

But on Otter Hill the wintry elements were bent on invasion and destruction. Everything that the snow could possibly bury was buried; everything the howling wind could possibly pick up was blown away. The water in the cistern under the kitchen often froze over completely, so that the Otters had to lift the plank in the floor, break the ice through with a pole, and drop down the bucket—the boys called it fishing for water. Currents of glacial air accompanied the dripping bucket as it was pulled up into the kitchen.

The winter days were fairly endless. At three o'clock blue shadows appeared on the edge of the woods and the white fields commenced to turn the color of slate. As though ashes had sifted down instead of snowflakes the world was suddenly gray. And at four o'clock it was dark, and the children would come into the house to face the longest part of the day. One could not go to bed before eight, and supper took only thirty minutes away from those

four interminable hours. As Geoff put it, you didn't feel like settin' 'round disgustin' wars and politics alla time.

But Geoff told me it was good just to talk and think about Lena, whom they were always remembering.

Sometimes, when Mickey thought of her, his eyes filled with bright blue sparks, and he would say: "Do you remember when Lena—" and everybody shared a few moments of happiness while Mickey related his latest recollection of her, which immediately called for a dozen others, funny, tender, but mostly gay.

"Once Lena told me something," one of the little boys would exclaim; he would smile and whisper to his nearest companion until the whole family clamored to hear what it was Lena had told him. Katy and Mary corresponded all winter, and in one of her letters Mary wrote: "You know, Lena is beginning to seem just like a dream. I sometimes wonder if she was really here."

You are sitting on the edge of a little green clearing in the woods, all hushed and quiet, with trees and shrubs and tall sweet grass swaying in the warm, summery breeze. It is early summer, perhaps it is spring.

You are half asleep; the warm scent of sunshine on flowers and the sound of droning bees adds to your drowsiness. A brilliant bird flits across the clearing, like a flaming meteor.

You have never seen one like her before. She pauses in a little tree to rest, and you watch her with a thrilling heart. Your eyes follow her from one flowering bush to another, and then, almost before you know it, she has flown away for good, and you feel a sense of imponderable loss.

But you think of the experience with a glow around your heart and a feeling that somehow, you have touched loveliness. You are still sleepy, your eyes a little heavy. Was it only a dream, or did I really see her?

We had a couple of weeks of fairly decent weather in January, but it was February before I got out to see the Otters again.

The country road was banked on both sides with snow, so high

you couldn't see over it; the effect was eerie—it reminded me of the passage the Lord had cleared in the Red Sea for the Israelites to pass through. I met eight school-going Otters on the road, and piled them into my car.

"We're living in our new house, you know," boasted Mickey.

"But we're going towards Otter Hill," I said.

"Sure enough, we are," returned Mickey, with a chuckle; and the other small Otters all laughed merrily. They seem to realize that they lead a novel kind of existence.

In spite of the hardships they endured, the itinerant past of the Otters had always seemed attractive to me.

As a small boy, I had lived in only one house; the Otters had traipsed all over the countryside—in Pennsylvania as well as New York. Stores of new impressions—such as are provided by abrupt changes in environment—received by a sensitive child when his mind is fresh and impressionable, may color his entire life and, indeed, provide the necessary stimulation to make an artist of him providing he has the initial spark. It was the constant shifts and moves and changes in their lives that made the Otter boys so self-assured, even when they found themselves in surroundings to which they were unaccustomed; made them seem so much at home everywhere and able to make others feel at home. I would have exchanged my own boyhood for William's or Geoff's or Mickey's gladly.

"Did you move the house like Mrs. Greenwood did?" I asked.

"Sure we did," said Mickey.

"How—"

"But it fell apart first," put in Geoff. "And it's a good thing we wasn't livin' in it. Anyway, they had a baby hurricane down in Happy Valley, and when we got there the next day, we found the hull business down on the ground. Everybody had been snitchin' lumber from the house, and weakenin' the foundation. Well, we had a spell of good weather in January and we trucked the lumber up ta Otter Hill. Gee, you jist wait till you see the shanty we put up.

The Otters were very proud of their new house. It was a simple rectangular dwelling, with doors and windows inserted in such odd places (the doors and windows had to accommodate the thick timbers the Otters couldn't bear to cut) that its façade seemed to wear an astonished, but not a displeased look. It was a very substantial dwelling for one erected so hastily, warm as toast inside; the babies didn't have to crawl under the stove and behind it to keep warm. And although the weather was below zero still, Mrs. Otter, when she let me in, didn't have to dig out newspapers from under the door. She beamed when I congratulated her on the new house.

"Everybody help built, even Molly," she said. "We have good luck, not very cold. Only five above when we built. Freeze hand and feet plenty though, but now me warm as toast, never cold again, by golly."

The house consisted of one big, low-ceilinged room, very snug and comfortable. Rows of little stalls for sleeping quarters gave it the appearance of a barn. Above these quarters was a loft, with more beds—that is where the bigger boys slept, directly under the roof, and they didn't mind too much not being able to stand up when they undressed. A good deal of work had to be done inside, but Mrs. Otter said she could finish that off gradually. Her eyes glistened when she pointed out the heavy beams, and the other thick pieces of timber no wind could go through.

The cellar helped keep the house warm and it was such a good place to store vegetables. Mrs. Otter's bins, full of turnips, potatoes, carrots, squash and onions made a comforting sight. The children loved to look up at the wide shelf under a window, which was lined with preserves in glass jars that glowed in the light—golden peaches, red and purple plums, pale yellow pears, green pickles and cucumbers and relishes. "Will you live here in summer, too?" I asked.

"Oh, no, this is our winter home," replied Geoff, with some ostentation. "In summer, we're gonna move back to the other house, and use this one for a chicken coop. It's better'n the one

that got burnt down even—such thick, solid lumber. By the time the cold weather comes round again, the chickens'll all be killed off, and then we'll clean it up and move back here."

It sounded like an ideal arrangement.

"And do you know what?" said Geoff. "We had another letter from Lena, and a little more money. But Mum didn't wanna keep it this time, and she can't send it back, either, because Lena didn't tell us where she is. She only said she was going to Florida with her mother."

I could tell Geoff was divided between a longing to know exactly where Lena was and what she was doing, and his pleasure in the realization that since her Florida address would be unknown to them, they would have to keep the money she had sent.

"I'm going to Florida, too," I told Geoff. "Maybe I'll see Lena there."

But I didn't tell the Otters that after a brief vacation in Florida, I was leaving for China, to join the American staff of a flying school. It might be years before I saw the Otters again, and meanwhile, the children would grow up. Like any father, I'd hate to miss watching their growth and development. And Molly it was, I knew, whom it would be hardest to kiss good-by.

She was in bed with a cold. She crawled into my lap, just as she used to do in summer, and went through my pockets. "Give me a kiss. I love you."

"I love you too," she piped.

"When will we meet again? When the hurley burley's done? When the battle's lost or won?"

"When the battle's lost or won," piped Molly, thinking only of the handful of coppers I had put in my pocket for her to find.

Mrs. Otter thought my departure called for a little celebration (and, incidentally, a sort of housewarming) and she hastily mixed up a delicious pastry from an old-country recipe. I wish I could remember the name of it. Anyway, she pounded dough, raisins, and squash meat together, cut the mixture into small squares sprinkled over with butter and sugar and put them into the oven.

With these little pastries, and coffee and elderberry wine and cider, and the fruit I had brought along, we had a little party. Mrs. Otter said she had an intense longing to visit Florida or California, where it was summer in winter, and see an orange tree, with golden fruits hanging from it, some day before she died.

"Then we won't see you till next spring again, will we?" said Geoff.

"And maybe by that time Lena'll come back," said Mickey.

"Lena will never come back," William told me, a few minutes later. He had asked me to step outside, ostensibly to show me a brace of rabbits he'd shot that morning. "Lena's dead," he said.

William hung the rabbits on an iron peg under one of the windows. "She was going to be married," he went on, "and she wrote me a letter, and told me all about it, but I didn't show it to anybody. That's how she got the money she sent us—by promising to marry some rich old man she said she stole away from her mother. He claimed to be in his fifties, but Lena believed he was much older than that and she thought he might even have a heart attack on their honeymoon—excitement wasn't supposed to be good for him. Then she'd be a rich widow, and could do exactly as she pleased."

William's voice was trembling. I looked down in the snow. "Well, they all went down to Florida together in a boat—early in December, or in late November—Lena, her mother, that old man and a younger man, and late one night, Lena fell overboard. I read about it in an old newspaper just last week but I didn't show that to anybody either. Anyway, there was a scandal, because one of the boat's sailors, whom Lena's mother had made trouble for over something, claimed he saw her give Lena a push, but she told the police he was only out for revenge because she had tried to get him fired. That's how she got out of it, although they'd all been drinking. I don't know what to think myself, but from what Lena told me, her mother must have been a terrible woman. She might have figured that with Lena out of the way she could get the rich old man back. Poor kid—no wonder she wanted to stay with us, after a

mother like that. No wonder she thought Otter Hill was such a nice place!"

William took my arm, and guided me towards the kitchen door. "Anyway, Lena was washed ashore and they kept her some place until her mother claimed her. Do you know what they found in her bag? One of those snapshots you took last summer, showing the whole nineteen of us together. She took it with her wherever she went."

"She was a lovely girl, William," I said. "God rest her."

"Yes, she was a lovely girl."

William looked at me shyly. "You know," he said, huskily, "when Lena left here last summer, I don't really think she went back to that old life she—"

"I don't think so either, William."

We were at the kitchen door; I had told Mrs. Otter I wouldn't come in again. She was standing in the doorway, with a dozen faces framing her big figure, all of them shining on me. I said good-by.

"Good-by, good-by! And if you see Lena down in Florida, give her our love, won't cha?" cried Geoff. "And tell her ta come back."

I waved good-by again. "Yes, I'll give her your love. And I'll tell her to come back."

TWO YEARS LATER

I Love You, Molly Otter

Curley fell in Chungking early in 1944. Details of his death came to me from William Otter, in the armed forces in India. He had seen Curley two weeks before he was killed, and the two friends, meeting again in a faraway land, held a celebration that lasted two days. It must have done William good to get a little

drunk. "Curley looked great," William wrote his family. "But he was always talking about Smoky Valley."

Some months before, Curley wrote to me saying, "Now that you are acquainted with them, you'll have to look after my family in Smoky Valley and see that they fare well. If you don't, and something happens to me, I'll haunt you." But the Otters no longer need looking after. They are looking after others. Humanitarians usually become philanthropists, even if only in a small way. Mr. Otter has a defense job, at very good wages; William and Calvin regularly send money home; the bills are all paid, Mrs. Otter owns the plush coat the family had coveted for her so long, and they have a little money in the bank. Even what they need they seem to want to share with others.

Katy Curley refuses to give up Red Maples, her lovely house in Smoky Valley. But for the Otter family, perhaps she would have to. It would be too lonely there for a woman alone. She depends on the Otters for company. At least two of the little girls stay with her every night; it is a treat for them, and so good for Katy. The boys cut her lawn, look after Curley's poultry, weed the garden and pick the grapes and apples. Katy knows they will never forget Curley. They speak about him so naturally, it pleases rather than hurts her. "Curley wouldn't like it this way," Geoff or Mickey will remark. "He'd like it that way." Katy says she'd like to adopt Molly and Jennie and Mrs. Otter's newest baby boy—the one they call Curley.

There have been two new babies in the family since Curley's departure—a girl named Lena, and the boy they call Curley; and Mrs. Otter thinks there will be no more children.

Curley wrote to me that the Chinese counterparts of the Otters, a family named Hsiang, had all perished when their village was bombed. "Mrs. Hsiang reminded me so much of Mrs. Otter," he used to say. It was shortly afterward that Curley went out on the retaliating—and successful—mission in which he was killed. His plane came back, but by that time—and in spite of everything his

companions did to keep him alive—Curley was dead. In his pocket they found a letter he had written to the Otters. There was an individual message to every member of the family. "Geoff, don't take in any counterfeit money," Curley had said. "Don't forget I love you, Molly Otter," was his message to the little girl.

Well, Curley must be in some good place now. Perhaps he is seeing Lena there, and little Elsie Otter, Molly's twin—the one who fell into the rosebush. Mrs. Otter said the two little girls were absolutely identical, and perhaps Curley, when he is with Elsie, thinks she must be Molly, who had been such a favorite of his. I wonder if Elsie, like Molly, talks as though she had a miniature calliope in her throat. Curley and Lena would have so much in common: both of them had enjoyed a little earthly romance with the Otter family. Yes, it had been just that.

I only wish Curley could know about some of the things that are happening in Smoky Valley. Mrs. Merino is running around, telling everybody that Calvin Otter and her Angelina are engaged. What a joke if Calvin Otter should come home from war with "an Australian bride! Although he is in Australia, twelve thousand miles away, I saw him not long ago; in fact, I saw him just the other day.

He was in an Australian park, standing in front of a cage, looking at a honey-bear. And instead of having one pretty girl for company, he actually had three! I drove out to the country the same day to tell the Otters all about it. "I've just seen Calvin," I said. "He was in a zoo, looking at a honey-bear."

The Otters stared at me compassionately; they must have thought I was crazy. "But in the movies, in a newsreel," I hastened to explain. Next day the Otters all climbed into Mr. Otter's new used car and drove to the city. They stayed to see the newsreel over three or four times.

Then there was a wedding in this countryside, which was reported in all the New York newspapers, and Curley would have been keenly interested.

It is pleasant enough when two young people, deeply in love, are married. It is a still more pleasant spectacle when two middle-aged people, deeply in love, are married. This wedding took place in a lovely white-brick house—a house that rivals Red Maples for beauty and serenity. Mrs. Emmaline Ashley, the county's most prosperous farmer, was the bride, and the groom a charming but rather eccentric New Yorker—about whom Curley had had something to say in his story. Mrs. Ashley raised grain on her farm principally, and went in for dairying. But now she is specializing in strawberries, and getting fancy prices for them.

Tomorrow, I am driving out into the country to see the Otters—and especially to see William, just home on furlough. He has been abroad almost two years, and has a three weeks' leave. He will tell me about Curley, and their reunion and celebration together; everything that Curley said and did.

I expect it will be a lovely day. The wild roses should be blooming along Otter Creek, and the creamy lace of elder blossoms blowing over the stream. There'll be orioles and bluebirds to watch, too. We're going to picnic on a high green bank over Aspen Pond. It is a serene sheet of water, surrounded by deep forests—just like a little Adirondack lake. Mrs. Otter will be there; she'll bring some mending along and sit on the grass and perhaps tell us about Lidice. The Otters can't get over what happened to that village. If they had remained in the old country, they say, they'd all be dead like the Hsiangs in China—dead, or perhaps worse.

Mr. Otter will be there, with his accordion. Katy Curley will be there.

Geoff (fifty dollars ain't 'nough pay for a soldier) will be there, and Rolf (cripes, Mum, 'magine William winnin' the boxing championship of his comp'ny) will be there; and Alix (gee, I seen an eagle las' week, sorta reminded me of Curley) will be there and Mickey (I'm gonna join up with the Marines soon's I'm able) and Davy and Dennis (we're not 'fraidy-cats any more) and Molly

(I'm a great big girl now) will be there. All the children will be there.

And if Curley and Lena aren't present, their little namesakes will be, for remembrance.

